

The Ideology of Uncritical U.S. Journalism: Its Political-Professional and Political-Economic Roots

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SUMMARY

This article offers a theoretical argument about how to think about journalistic ideology. I argue that the ideology of uncritical war reporting in U.S. news media arises from both professional norms and the political economy of news media. Two incidents for which initial reporting in the New York Times followed the U.S. government's claims but later reporting showed those claims and that reporting to be false are used as empirical support for this theoretical argument. In each incident, U.S. military forces killed civilians, but the New York Times repeated U.S. government claims to the contrary. A comparison between the reporting of those incidents in the New York Times with reporting in "alternative" U.S. news media and The Times of London demonstrates the uncritical ideology present in "mainstream" U.S. news media. Through a combination of the primary theoretical argument and the supporting empirical evidence, this article contributes to the journalism studies literature by demonstrating that different journalistic ideologies are produced from different political-professional and political-economic circumstances that can be found within national contexts and in cross-national comparison. The theoretical argument suggests journalistic ideologies should be considered specifically and directly related to both political-professional and political-economic relationships in which journalists produce news. There is neither a single international journalistic ideology nor even a single U.S. journalistic ideology.

Keywords: ideology, journalism, professionalism, political economy, war reporting, American journalism

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Introduction

In the first week of April 2010, two incidents in which U.S. military forces killed civilians became the subject of coverage in U.S. news media when it was reported that the initial U.S. government version of events and the initial reporting that echoed that narrative were false. Such uncritical reporting could be seen as representative of a problematic journalistic ideology in the U.S. This article considers that question in an effort to determine how to most realistically account for journalistic ideology. It is primarily a theoretical work in that it critiques two common theories of why journalists in the U.S. produce news in a manner uncritical of government claims. The purpose of this critique is to argue that combining the two theoretical positions would produce a theory of journalistic ideology with a more holistic understanding of ideology and, thus, more explanatory power. The ideology of journalists should be seen as a political-professional issue *and* a political-economic issue: If journalistic ideology is the thought that guides practice, then that thinking is related to the political-economic relations of news production as much as it is related to professional norms. This article then connects that theoretical argument to an empirical observation of U.S. journalistic ideology in the practice and product of war reporting. It attempts to demonstrate the importance of considering the specificity of political-professional and political-economic realities: Journalists at different news media in the U.S. reported the same story differently, so there is no single American journalistic ideology. One comparative case is also considered to support the claim that there is neither a U.S. nor an international journalistic ideology. Journalists in different circumstances have different ideas about journalism and practice journalism differently.

I first briefly analyze the concept of ideology. I then examine some specific applications of ideology in the context of journalism before focusing on two common ways of explaining U.S. journalism: 1) as a mostly ideological issue rooted in professionalism that creates an uncritical attitude in U.S. political reporting that results in uncritical practice and 2) as a mostly material issue of the political-economic limitations of profit-driven, advertising-supported U.S. news media. I attempt to demonstrate that, while each approach contributes unique value to understanding journalism, neither sufficiently accounts for the specificity of observably different journalistic practices that must be connected to different journalistic ideologies. A theoretical position that considers journalists' relations to power as a professional ideology and practice and news media's relations to power as a political-economic situation would enable a more complete understanding of why and how the news is produced in specific ways. I then examine the initial coverage of two incidents

in the *New York Times* to determine the extent to which the reporting in that newspaper was uncritical of the U.S. government's claims. This provides an example of the kind of journalism that would be criticized by scholars focused on political-professional explanations and scholars focused on political-economic explanations. I compare the *New York Times* coverage to the more critical reporting of the incidents found in other news media to demonstrate that the dominant journalistic retelling of the events was not simply based on all the available evidence but was, in fact, an example of uncritical acceptance of claims made by the government without an attempt to determine if there were other versions of events available. The journalistic ideology that seems to underlie the *New York Times* coverage is contrasted by the ideology that seems to underlie the reporting in other media with different professional norms, political-economic realities, and national contexts. This empirically observable difference suggests journalistic ideology cannot be accurately theorized without accounting for both political-professional and political-economic journalistic realities.

Ideology in general and journalistic ideology

A brief discussion of "ideology" is necessary. Among the many ways it has been conceptualized are: as the ideas of a group, including occupational ideology; "any knowledge that is posed as natural or generally applicable"; and "the practice of reproducing social relations of inequality within the sphere of signification and discourse" (Hartley, 2002: 103-104). Thompson (1995: 213) is one who uses the third definition. Thus, ideology is not something explicit but rather ingrained in a person's thoughts and actions. Many often define ideology more simply as "ideas" (Hartley, 2002: 105). Gitlin relates the ideology of journalists to a general process of ideological hegemony. Media are a key part of "the systematic ... engineering of mass consent to the established order" (Gitlin, 2003: 253). He assigns a lot of power to the professional ideology of journalism: "Everyday frames and procedures sufficed to sustain the legitimacy of the economic-political system as a whole" (273). The ideology of journalism itself serves an ideological purpose for the political-economic order: "[T]he media have a general interest in stabilizing the liberal capitalist order as a whole, and it is this interest ... which stands behind the dominant news frames" (280). Bourdieu (1995: 33) offers a different means to explain journalism that appears to combine aspects of journalistic professionalism with political economy but fundamentally considers the two distinct though structurally related: "[T]o understand what happens in journalism, it is not

sufficient to know who finances the publications, who the advertisers are, who pays for the advertising, where the subsidies come from, and so on. Part of what is produced in the world of journalism cannot be understood unless one conceptualizes this microcosm as such and endeavors to understand the effects that the people engaged in this microcosm exert on one another.” Journalists, then, “are caught up in structural processes which exert constraints on them such that their choices are totally preconstained” (45). Hallin and Mancini (2004) offer an alternative to explanations of journalism based on journalistic ideologies that is also not a political-economic explanation. They argue that particular (news) media systems are associated with particular political systems. The effect is to eliminate the possibility of accounting for the specificity and difference found within a single media system. While they attempt to account in a more complete and specific way for the nature of a news media system by determining its particular qualities and comparing it with other systems, they push in a direction opposite to that which I suggest. The U.S. news media system itself should not be seen as monolithic and the importance of systems and structures should not completely overshadow the importance of individuals.

Although Williams (1977) convincingly criticizes the common use of ideology as “a system of beliefs” or even “the general process of the production of meanings and ideas” (pp. 55–71) and questions the continued usefulness of the term (p. 71), I will use the term, and I will restrict my usage of it to that commonly found in scholarly discussions of journalistic ideology: essentially, a system of beliefs or ideas. I will, however, push in a direction similar to Williams by arguing that, even if ideology is conceptualized in this problematic way, it must be seen as inseparable from material social relations and processes. This is why I am claiming there are political-professional and political-economic roots to journalistic ideology. In this way, my argument about how to theorize ideology in a manner useful for empirical research differs from that of Deuze (2005: 443), who attempts to fill in the details of the “occupational ideology” of journalists that he claims others have left unspecified. He sees ideology as an understanding of journalism “in terms of how journalists give meaning to their newswork” (p. 444) and as “an (intellectual) process over time, through which the sum of ideas and views — notably on social and political issues — of a particular group is shaped, but also as a process by which other ideas and views are excluded or marginalized” (p. 445). Deuze claims most scholars discuss the ideology of journalists or journalism without explaining the specific elements of that ideology, and he attempts to fill in those details, but he does not similarly consider what is meant by “ideology.” That kind of conceptual clarity is also needed; what is possibly the most common use of the term is prob-

lematic, as Williams (1977) argues. Deuze uses it in that problematic way when he defines it as “a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular group, including — but not limited to — the general process of the production of meanings and ideas (within that group)” (p. 445). That definition suggests exclusively “mental” origins for ideology, in which beliefs are first developed and then materialized in professional practice. The importance of material relations in the development of that ideology is missed.

In order to enter the discussion of journalistic ideology, I am forced to partially accept this problematic conceptualization of ideology. I will use ideology to mean a system of ideas. I will also, however, argue for expanding the theory of ideology so that it is neither disconnected from material social relations — as is fundamentally the case with the first theory of journalistic ideology I consider below — nor directly attributable to those material social relations — an impression the political economy of news media risks creating. I argue against the usefulness of discussing journalistic ideology without relating it to the specific political-economic realities of journalists at specific news media. The nature of ideology — even if it is seen as a system of ideas or beliefs — is concealed by the more common, but limited, conceptualization I argue against: that found in discussions of professionalism and within the broad field of political communication. Ideas, beliefs, norms, values and other “ideological” categories are not distinct from material social relations and processes. How journalists think and act is not a one-way causal connection from the ideas they have about journalism to their actions as a journalist, with the political-economic reality of news media as a separate, external factor. Journalistic thinking and journalistic being are inseparable: It is impossible to understand the ideology of journalism without understanding the specific social reality of journalists. The latter includes two relationships that are the focus of this essay: the political-professional relationship of journalists to those in power, on whom journalistic dependence is dictated by professional norms, and the political economy of news media, including the political-economic relationship of journalists to the news organizations of their employment, another sort of dependence that affects ideas and practices of journalism. That those relationships do not exist independently can be seen in the crude but somewhat useful distinction between the “mainstream” and “alternative” U.S. press. The mainstream press tends to be relatively uncritical of those in power and profit-driven; the alternative or independent press tends to be relatively critical of those in power and have an organizational structure designed to allow it to keep the profit motive from being an overwhelming priority. The importance of considering those specific realities is that it becomes possible to see different journalistic ideologies in different circumstances.

Influences on journalistic ideology

Previous research has demonstrated the widespread failure of the U.S. press to provide critical reporting of the actions of the U.S. government. More typical is an uncritical reiteration of the debate among political elites, which can range from consensus to a limited Republican-Democrat disagreement. Research that has specifically looked at war-related reporting has found an intensification of this uncritical stance that at times is even outright supportive of government efforts. This study labels that a “political-professional” problem for U.S. journalism, as the core issue is the dominant relationship with political power that professional U.S. journalism has developed. I contrast that with the more critical relationship maintained by some mainstream and alternative news media. Analyses of the political economy of U.S. news media have examined this press-government relationship from a different perspective, relating the political-professional issues noted above with political-economic factors that function as structural limitations on most U.S. news media. The commercial imperatives of advertising-supported, profit-driven news media structurally constrain the claimed journalistic desire to be independent and critically minded. The core issue of the political-economic problem is the dominant relationship with political power U.S. journalism has developed as a result of the economics of news production and the role of news media in the economic system. I contrast that with the more critical relationship maintained by some mainstream and alternative news media. A comparison of reporting in the *New York Times* with that in U.S.-based, for-profit online news outlets *Salon*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Counterpunch*, as well as *The Times of London*, is potentially illuminating for a deeper understanding of the political-professional and political-economic aspects of uncritical reporting.

The government and the uncritical U.S. press: a political-professional problem

The “watchdog” concept is commonly used to describe an ideal relationship between the press and the government. It suggests news media “serve the public as a check on the operation of their government” and “act as agents of the citizenry, keeping a watchful eye on the government, watchdogs guarding the house of the republic itself” (Koehler, 1998: 691). Much of the literature on the nature of war-related reporting and the press-government relationship in the U.S., however, demonstrates a reality that does not match that ideal: a record of uncritical journalism

that extends back at least to the post-1970s era that supposedly marked the heyday of U.S. political journalism. In a survey of some of the literature on war reporting, Robinson (2004: 97) notes much of it shows “the consistency between media agendas and the agendas of governments”: Media defer to the state and “elite-legitimated controversy” typically defines the boundary of reporting on war and national security. There is little attempt to go beyond the voices of power to provide citizens with a full picture of the spectrum of debate — much less the *possible* spectrum of debate — relating to issues of war and the military; the debate that occurs in Washington is all that is consistently presented. Boyd-Barrett (2004: 38) finds a similar pattern in war reporting: “Time and again the media align themselves with state propaganda, most intensely so in times of war.” Lehmann (2005) also finds a pattern of uncritical reporting. The result is that “the media’s reporting of war has been almost guaranteed to misinform and obfuscate” (Boyd-Barrett, 2004: 39). Entman (1991) says the importance of this uncritical pattern in political and war reporting is that a news frame is a “constructed reality” (p. 9): constructed in the sense that it is a journalistically created version of events; reality in the sense that the news of the event is the reality as far as readers are likely to consider it. “[T]he news frame helps establish the literally ‘common sense’ ... interpretation of events” (p. 6).

The period just prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq is often characterized as a particularly glaring case of uncritical journalism in the U.S. Before the invasion, “U.S. journalists accepted, for the most part, uncritically the slogans of the Bush administration,” creating “patriotic,” rather than watchdog journalism (Lehmann, 2005: 85). Dodson (2010: 101) borrows a concept from Žižek in describing journalistic professionalism as an “ideological fantasy” for journalists who “fail to recognise the contingency and ultimately the strategic utility of their practice for military power.” This serves “to prevent or restrain a critical reconsideration of journalism’s norms” (p. 111). Marder (2008: 8) points out that the failure of the U.S. press to be any kind of watchdog did not start with the buildup to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but it did reach what seems to be its lowest point possible then, when “no attempt at watchdog reporting was made by a major news operation, with the exception of the excellent reporting done by the then-Knight Ridder Washington bureau. In general, it can be said that the press was actually in a supportive relationship with the Bush administration regarding the invasion of Iraq.” There is no universal U.S. journalistic ideology, however. One study found significantly more critical and oppositional coverage of the Panama invasion in *The Nation* than in *Newsweek* and *Time* (Gutierrez-Villalobos, et al., 1994), demonstrating the potential usefulness of distinguishing “mainstream” from “alternative” news media, though it might be even more useful to think beyond that binary division.

One attempt to describe the “global journalist” advocates a structuralist “hierarchy of influences” model (Reese, 2001: 178). The global journalist is seen “within a web of organizational and ideological constraints” that are the “social structural context of journalism” (p. 174). The highest level is the “ideological,” concerned with “how media symbolic content is connected with larger social interests, how meaning is constructed in the service of power” (p. 183). That approach only even attempts to demonstrate two one-way flows — society to media and media to individual — in which the lower levels of influence constitute “a coherent ideological result” that amounts to media as instruments of social control (p. 183). This essay argues that is an unsatisfactory approach to understanding the ideology of journalism and its significance. While attempting to incorporate a broad array of constraints on journalism, Reese sees those constraints as distinct until he joins them in his model. The political economy of news media is nowhere to be found.

Bennett et al. (2007) provide an empirical study of the public ramifications of the failure of the press to play a “watchdog” or similar role, as demanded of it by democratic press theory. Bennett et al. look specifically at the way the U.S. press covered U.S. government action in relation to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and Hurricane Katrina. They find the press is quite deferential to political power, “indexing” its coverage to the claims of “official sources” and providing an uncritical picture rather than an independent one. This could be seen as an example of the problem of so-called journalistic objectivity. In a narrow sense, contradicting government claims would necessitate journalists doing something other than objective reporting. It could, of course, be argued that the supposed objective reality would precisely not depend on what official sources (subjectively) say it is; it would be beyond them. Bennett et al. propose a theory of a “semi-independent press” as a more accurate depiction of U.S. news media than the standard notions of a democratic “free press”:

The core principle of the mainstream press system in the United States appears to be this: the mainstream news generally stays within the sphere of official consensus and conflict displayed in the public statements of the key government officials who manage the policy areas and decision-making processes that make the news. (p. 49)

The authors specify they are discussing the nature of the mainstream press, which suggests an alternative press would function in an alternative way with an alternative ideology, but their focus is the mainstream press. The authors outline three social realities they suggest structurally limit the abilities for journalists to work as independent public servants (Bennett, et al., 2007: 3–4):

- There is a class of professionals who attempt to control information to the advantage of those in power
- Media are no longer held publicly accountable to assumed democratic responsibilities
- Public disconnection from and antagonism toward the press makes independent, critical reporting “risky”

That formulation provides one of the most astute characterizations of what is referred to in this paper as the political-professional aspect of uncritical U.S. journalism, focusing on the relationship between the press and the government and the professional norms of “mainstream” U.S. journalists. The press-government relationship that leads to official-source dependency and uncritical reporting of what officials say is a choice made by the mainstream journalistic profession as it has defined its own norm of “objectivity”: In this view, it is inherently objective to report the official line, while it is crusading or biased to report assessments critical of the government. Bennett et al. (2007: 9) argue there is a journalistically “self-imposed dependence on officially sanctioned information”: “[T]he press has become trapped in reporting rules of its own making.” Journalists in the national press corps may be as “embedded” as those traveling with military units in another country. This is why the political-economic critique is so important: to understand why U.S. journalism made these rules for itself.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry (1999), who worked for *The Associated Press*, *Newsweek*, and PBS Frontline and “broke many of the stories now known as the Iran-contra affair,” argues this uncritical trend in U.S. journalism should be understood in connection with the efforts by the U.S. government to keep the press from challenging official narratives the way it had in the era of Vietnam and Watergate. The process used to accomplish this was to “limit the news media’s coverage of the violence overseas while pressuring journalists in Washington to frame the issues in ways more supportive of U.S. policy. In this endeavor, the editorial offices in Washington and New York were viewed as the crucial switching points for limiting or shutting off the flow of troubling information to the American people” (6). The effect of such efforts to control information and manage the press, in conjunction with the press’ self-imposed dependence on “official” information, was to produce an uncritical approach to the reporting of declared and covert military and CIA actions.

Zollmann (2009) presents an effort to connect the political-professional and political-economic problems, examining the self-imposed limits of journalistic ideology in connection with the third filter in Herman and Chomsky’s “propaganda model”: “the media’s reliance on official sources related to the government as well

as to other powerful institutions” (p. 98). Although Herman and Chomsky claim to present a “political economy” of mass media, the central feature is the “propaganda model,” in which media play a propagandistic role of producing ideology as “values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour” (cited in Zollmann, 2009: 99). This resembles the causal chain found in Reese (2001), in which external forces (“political economy” for Herman and Chomsky) act on media, and media then affect the consciousness of individuals (as propaganda for Herman and Chomsky). Zollmann (2009: 103) argues the indexing theory of Bennett et al. (2007) is limited “because it is blind towards the corporate power structure and its links with and influences on governments and media,” but it “can better explain variations in coverage.” Zollmann asks:

Given journalism’s tendency to be biased in favour of dominant political-economic elites, the question remains whether professionalism is the main problem, as argued by researchers such as Hallin and Bennett, or corporate-market constraints as proposed by the political economy perspective of the Propaganda Model? (p. 108).

Zollmann’s answer: Corporate control and professional journalism are “two sides of the same coin” (p. 110).

[C]orporate media constraints and the execution of professional norms, guided by these constraints, systematically reinforce bias in favour of integrated state-economic interests. Thus, the press fulfils, among its many other functions, a propaganda function as identified by Herman and Chomsky. (p. 113).

The previous research into the nature of political and war reporting suggests Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) “propaganda model” is still relevant, which points toward the importance of considering the professional norms of journalism in connection with the political economy of media. Much blame in the research cited above is put on the press for choosing to abandon its “watchdog” position. While this is certainly something that must be examined, this supposed journalistic choice points toward the importance of considering potential political-economic reasons for this “choice.” Many political economists of media have argued the profit-focused, advertising-supported nature of the U.S. news media system creates a powerful structural limitation on the actual freedom of the “free” press. Bennett, et al. (2007: 2) hint at the importance of the political economy of media: “Thinking squarely about the democratic role of the press would surely be easier if most mainstream news organizations were not embedded in large corporations that are more concerned about representing shareholder interests than embracing public-interest standards

that might better serve democracy.” Ultimately, however, they limit their concern in this area to a discussion of the “public responsibilities of the press” and corporate “social responsibility.” This is where political economy provides an understanding of another key aspect of journalistic ideology.

The political economy of news media

Journalism is more than a business; it is a vital part of a functioning democracy. The current political-economic structure of the news media system in the U.S. is one that emphasizes the first at the expense of the latter. With profit-maximization as the first goal, rather than providing information to the public to facilitate the process of self-government, there is simply no reason to expect the press to function as a “watchdog” or “fourth estate.” The owner of a news organization in such a system has incentives only to do what is necessary to keep a high profit margin. In addition, media companies are continually consolidating ownership and then slashing jobs and resources devoted to the basic journalistic endeavors of investigating government and others in power and reporting the findings to the public. Previous analyses of this aspect of U.S. news media show the quality of journalism — and democracy itself — suffers under this system.

Baker (2007) describes quite forcefully why concentrated media ownership is democratically objectionable and why it predictably leads to journalism of poor quality. He has also explains how the reliance on advertising as a primary source of revenue, an aspect of profit-based media ownership in the U.S., negatively impacts the quality of journalism (Baker, 1994). McChesney (2004: 57) argues that the failure of U.S. journalism to carry out its democratic duties “stems directly from the system of profit-driven journalism in largely noncompetitive markets that began to emerge over a century ago ... Concentrated private control over the press, with the aim of profit maximization, has been the rudder directing U.S. journalism for more than a century.” Concentrated ownership intensifies the tendency of profit-based media to focus on the bottom line and the most efficient way to make a profit at the expense of the resources necessary to allow journalists to investigate, report, and edit. The larger the entity, the more extreme this bottom-line focus is (Baker, 2007: 29). Publicly traded companies are virtually guaranteed to operate in this way, considering the fiduciary responsibility of those in charge to return the greatest possible profit to investors. “[T]he most obvious plot line is: publicly traded companies fire journalists, degrade quality, and increase profits” (p. 36). News media entities that are part of conglomerates, meanwhile, are vulnerable to outside pressures. “[C]

onglomerate ownership structurally creates economic vulnerability to outside pressure and creates internal incentives to trade journalistic integrity for the conglomerate's other economic interests," structurally ensuring that the journalism produced will not be in the public interest (pp. 40–41). Mergers make this problem worse by creating new opportunities to gain profit by cutting costs (p. 42).

Previous research claims the heavy dependence on advertising revenue is a particularly problematic aspect of the political economy of U.S. news media. More than eight decades ago, Sinclair (1928) said, "Financially speaking, our big newspapers and popular magazines are today more dependent upon their advertisers than they are upon their readers. ... A newspaper or popular magazine is a device for submitting competitive advertising to the public, the reading-matter being bait to bring the public to the hook." Advertising, Sinclair wrote, is "the 'legitimate' graft of newspapers and magazines, the main pipeline whereby Big Business feeds its journalistic parasites" (p. 282). "To expect justice and truth-telling of a capitalist newspaper," he said, "is to expect asceticism at a cannibal feast" (p. 224). Because of this pursuit of profit and dependence on advertising, Sinclair asserted, "not hyperbolically and contemptuously, but literally and with scientific precision, we define Journalism in America as the business and practice of presenting the news of the day in the interest of economic privilege" (p. 222). Baker (1994: 3) argues "private entities in general and advertisers in particular constitute the most consistent and the most pernicious 'censors' of media content." Sinclair (1928: 241) claimed advertising was one of the main ways in which the "Empire of Business" ensured journalism worked to the benefit of the capitalist class, and Baker (1994: 16) demonstrates why this is so. He connects the rise of advertising as newspapers' primary source of revenue with the twentieth century's steady decline in competition. Advertising, he claims, reduces the economic influence of readers' desire for diverse newspaper perspectives (p. 23), "creating the condition necessary for natural monopoly" (p. 25). He also finds a connection between increased reliance on advertising revenue and the decline of political partisanship and rise of objectivity that occurred during the same time period (p. 30).

McChesney (2004: 78) claims that the "primary and overarching factor" that explains recent developments in journalism is commercial pressure. It is this pressure that causes mass layoffs, the abandonment of investigative reporting, increased reliance on official sources, increased focus on political "strategy" rather than analyzing the actions of elected officials, increased focus on celebrity gossip as news, increased focus on crime and disaster, the tailoring of news to the wealthier audience desired by advertisers, the rise of uncritical business reporting, and the commercial corruption of the news itself (pp. 79–88). This argument is an example of

the simultaneous strength and limitation of the political economy of news media as an explanation of the ideology of journalism. It connects the nature of journalism to political-economic relationships and processes. Those relationships and processes are, indeed, an important part of the reality of news production and ideology of journalists. But, like the political-professional arguments above, it is focused on mainstream journalism or the dominant journalistic trends. This is certainly for good reason. As an analysis of the news media with which most people interact, it is surely essential to a complete awareness of the nature of news production. Further, the nature of news production is necessarily related to the ideology of the journalists who are the producers. However, a more complete understanding of the ideology of journalists in the U.S. would account for the specificities of news production — including the different nature of news production at alternative, non-profit, and public news media — and related specificities of journalistic ideology.

The uncritical ideology of the mainstream U.S. press can be seen as a result of both the political-professional and political-economic relationships and processes of journalism. Similarly, the more critical ideology apparent in other aspects of the U.S. press is a product of different political-professional and political-economic relationships. Much of the social-scientific research into the performance of journalism in the U.S. proceeds with, at most, a limited consideration of the political economy of media. It often focuses on journalistic professionalism as the generator of the observed ideology of journalists. The failures of the press in the U.S. cannot be fully discussed without including political-economic factors. Political-economic analyses of media, however, can offer theoretically sophisticated and empirically detailed accounts of the economic aspects of U.S. news media but do not provide equally illuminating treatments of the specific values and norms of journalists. This study argues journalistic ideology should be understood as consisting of both political-professional and political-economic aspects.

Two cases of an uncritical U.S. Press

On Feb. 12, 2010, in Afghanistan, U.S. forces shot and killed five people in a village in the Paktia Province. On July 12, 2007, a U.S. helicopter killed 12 people in Baghdad, including two Reuters journalists. In each case, the initial reporting in major U.S. news outlets mostly presented the Pentagon's version of events. In the same week in 2010, it became apparent that the initial stories in both incidents were false: The Pentagon had lied and most major U.S. news media had repeated that lie without even presenting it as possibly contradicted, let alone actively seeking

to independently determine what had happened, as the rhetoric of “watchdog” and “fourth estate” journalism would suggest. News outlets corrected the record with new reporting, but only after the evidence to the contrary became nearly impossible to ignore. In the case of the Afghanistan incident, more independent-minded journalists pursued the story and reported on the falsity of the Pentagon’s initial version of events. These revelations reached outlets like the *New York Times* in April 2010. This forced the Pentagon to admit its first account of the event was wrong, and it appears there was a cover-up effort on the part of the Pentagon. In the Iraq case, the whistleblower website WikiLeaks released a classified video that showed the helicopter killing of two Reuters journalists and 10 other people. The release of this video made it impossible for the Pentagon to stand by its initial story. In that same week in April 2010, the *New York Times* ran a story about the video and how it contradicted the initial claim of a combat situation. Again, it appears the Pentagon tried to cover up the truth of the incident until a military whistleblower turned over video of the killing to WikiLeaks.

On March 13, 2010, Jerome Starkey published an article in the News Corporation-owned *The Times of London* that NATO forces in Afghanistan had killed civilians in a nighttime raid and then tried to cover it up. The article, headlined “Nato ‘covered up’ botched night raid in Afghanistan that killed five,” appeared a month after the incident, in which five civilians — two pregnant women, a teenage girl, and two local officials — were killed by U.S. and Afghan soldiers. It was nearly another month before the *New York Times* reported that the initial NATO story was part of an attempted cover-up (Oppel Jr., 2010, April 4).

This incident provides one clear example of the kind of uncritical war reporting found in previous research on U.S. news media. The initial report on the day of the incident in the *New York Times* provided only a brief reiteration of the U.S. military’s version of events. At the time, NATO alleged the shooting involved a fight with militants, after which the bodies of three women were found “tied up, gagged, and killed” (Nordland, 2010, February 12). The story noted an alternative version from an Afghan police chief, who said it was “Taliban militants” who had killed five civilians, including two men. There is no indication of an effort by the *New York Times* reporter to ask non-official sources for their version of what happened. A reporter for *The Associated Press* did just that. The story repeated the NATO claim of a fight with insurgents and the later discovery of five bodies, including two “bound and gagged women,” but it gave nearly equal weight to claims that it was the U.S. soldiers who had killed the five civilians, noting “relatives of the dead accused American forces of being responsible for the deaths of all five people when contacted by The Associated Press by phone” (The Associated Press, 2010,

February 12). The reporter for *The Associated Press* was able to determine that there were reports directly contradictory to that from the U.S. military, while still producing a story on the same day as the incident.

The initial report from *The Associated Press* indicated there was evidence of a need for a journalistic investigation of the official claims about what happened, but it was nearly two months before the *New York Times* reported that the official version was false. That came only when the U.S. military admitted that was the case. Two days after Starkey's story about cover-up allegations, the *New York Times*, as part of a bigger story about reigning in the Special Operation Forces, detailed the claims by relatives of the civilians who were killed that it was the U.S. forces who had killed all five civilians (Oppel Jr. & Nordland, 2010, March 15). But while Starkey had already reported there was evidence the U.S. military had actively attempted to cover up the incident, the *New York Times* repeated the Pentagon's claims, including that the women were already dead before the incident, before noting relatives of those killed claimed U.S. forces were responsible.

On April 4, 2010, the *New York Times* reported the Pentagon had admitted U.S. forces were responsible for the deaths of the five civilians (Oppel Jr., 2010, April 4). The next day, Starkey in *The Times of London* and reporters for the *New York Times* reported that Afghan investigators believed the U.S. had attempted to cover up the incident by digging bullets out of the bodies of the three dead women (Starkey, 2010, April 5; Oppel Jr. & Wafa, 2010, April 5). Almost two months after the incident, the *New York Times* reported the long-known claims that contradicted the Pentagon's official version, and then only when officials changed the story — first, the Pentagon admitted the first story was false, and then Afghan investigators characterized it as a cover up. *The Associated Press*' reporting had suggested contradicting stories from the beginning, and Starkey had spent significant time interviewing the relatives of those killed to determine in March that the official story was covering up U.S. responsibility (without yet reporting allegations that the cover-up had involved U.S. soldiers going so far as to disturb the bodies of the women who were killed to create the story that they were already dead, and were not killed by gunfire). As Glenn Greenwald, a fiercely independent political blogger at the for-profit website *Salon* who won the 2009 Izzy Award from the Park Center for Independent Media (along with Amy Goodman), characterized the *New York Times*' reporting of the incident, "the *NYT* simply ignored entirely the claims of the residents of the village," while "serious conflicts about what actually took place were known from the very beginning" (Greenwald, 2010, April 5). On March 22, 2010, Starkey published an article on the *Nieman Watchdog* website of Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism in which he said, "NATO is rarely called to account. Their version of events, usu-

ally originating from the soldiers involved, is rarely seriously challenged” (Starkey, 2010, March 22). The reason, he said, is that “far too many of our colleagues accept the spin-laden press releases churned out of the Kabul headquarters” (ibid.).

An incident in Iraq in 2007 provides another example of this kind of uncritical journalism — “stenography,” Greenwald (2010, April 5) and others call it. On July 12, A U.S. Army Apache helicopter killed more than a dozen people, including a Reuters photographer and his driver, and injured two children who were in a van trying to help the wounded journalist, Namur Noor-Eldeen. As Dan Froomkin of for-profit website *The Huffington Post* — formerly a *Washington Post* columnist — later described the initial journalistic response, “The next day, the *New York Times* reported the military’s official cover story” (Froomkin, 2010, April 5).

That first story from the *New York Times* repeated the Pentagon’s claim that nine “insurgents” and two civilians had been killed. It quoted a military spokesperson’s claim: “There is no question that coalition forces were clearly engaged in combat operations against a hostile force” (Rubin, 2007, July 13). Three days later, Patrick Cockburn of the reader-supported *Counterpunch* reported the incident this way:

The US military says US and Iraqi forces engaged “a hostile force” and, after coming under fire, called for air support that killed nine insurgents and two civilians.

The police and witnesses tell a different story. A preliminary police report from al-Rashad police station said Mr Noor-Eldeen and Mr Chmagh were killed along with nine others by a “random American bombardment.” (Cockburn, 2007, July 16)

It was not until the whistleblower website WikiLeaks released the Army helicopter’s video of the incident on April 5, 2010 — almost three years later — that the *New York Times* had a story with a version of events other than the Pentagon’s. Like the more recent incident in Afghanistan, the more critical reporting in the *New York Times* in this case did not come about because of an independent investigative effort. It was the release of the video by WikiLeaks, a site devoted to releasing information those in power would prefer not get out — something most news organizations claim to be in the business of doing — that forced the renewed interest in this story. As Froomkin says of the Pentagon’s initial claim of “combat operations against a hostile force,” a claim that was uncritically repeated in the *New York Times* (Rubin, 2007, July 13), “The video shows otherwise” (Froomkin, 2010, April 5).

The video shows there was no hostile force against which the U.S. military was engaged in combat operations. In the *New York Times*’ first story (Rubin, 2007, July 13), a photo of the destroyed van used in the attempted rescue of Saeed Chmagh —

Noor-Eldeen's driver, who was alive at that point — is accompanied by a caption that implies the journalists entered an ongoing battle: "Their van, above, was hit near the scene of a firefight." The 38-minute video from the helicopter that killed the 12 people, released by WikiLeaks almost three years after the incident, shows this was not the case. In fact, the van arrived after the first round of the helicopter attack and attempted to help Chmagh. The van was then attacked, killing Chmagh and two would-be rescuers and injuring two children inside. As the *New York Times* article written after the release of the video indicates:

[T]he video does not show hostile action. Instead, it begins with a group of people milling around on a street, among them, according to WikiLeaks, Mr. Noor-Eldeen and Mr. Chmagh. The pilots believe them to be insurgents, and mistake Mr. Noor-Eldeen's camera for a weapon. They aim and fire at the group, then revel in their kills. (Bumiller, 2010, April 5)

Cockburn did not need video evidence of the killing to attempt to independently determine what had happened. His report just three days after the *New York Times* uncritically recited the Pentagon's version of events is perhaps one of the clearest examples of how the critical reporting done by some non-mainstream journalists compares to the reporting from a major, profit-driven organization like the *New York Times*. Cockburn, who works for a news organization that relies solely on donations and subscriptions, works from a skeptical view of any government claims about events. He finds out what witnesses and others outside the U.S. government say happened and finds a pattern that provides for a counter-narrative he gives equal weight with the U.S. military's version of events.

Conclusion

There are other recent examples of the Pentagon's claims turning out to be untrue:

- "NATO apologized Wednesday for shooting to death four unarmed Afghan civilians this week in Khost Province and acknowledged that it had wrongly described two of the victims as 'known insurgents'" (Oppel Jr, 2010, April 22)
- "An airstrike launched Sunday by United States Special Forces helicopters against what international troops believed to be a group of insurgents ended up killing as many as 27 civilians in the worst such case since at least September" (Nordland, 2010, February 23)

These and other incidents further demonstrate the need for journalists to take a more critical view of official stories. Instead, the pattern is one of consistent will-

ingness to repeat official stories without much, if any, effort to find out what other sources say. This reliance on official sources is documented in much of the research on political and war reporting in the U.S. I argue that such a relationship amounts to a political-professional problem of self-assigned “embedding” to political elites. The government does not force those who report on the Pentagon and other institutions of national political power to follow around officials and go only where told to go the way it does with reporters following military units in combat — that would evoke immediate cries of censorship. But most journalists in the major news outlets in the U.S. choose to work under just those conditions of self-censorship, and political elites are surely the beneficiary.

This professional journalistic choice, however, cannot be fully understood without a simultaneous consideration of the political-economic problem of U.S. journalism: Most of the major news organizations are profit-driven entities largely supported by advertising. This creates structural restrictions on the freedom of the press in the U.S. that are also effective censors. The demands placed on journalists in such a system limit their ability to work as independent “watchdogs” and principle investigators of the claims of the powerful.

A solution to both of these problems of U.S. journalism is necessary for democratic governance to work. Journalists cannot proceed from the assumption that repeating the claims of the political elite qualifies as “objective” reporting. That is an unacknowledged bias in favor of the powerful. At the same time, the fate and structure of news media cannot be left to the demands for profit above all else that capitalism places on entities that are not otherwise shielded. The political-professional problem is tied to the political-economic one. If journalistic ideology is seen as represented by the nature of the actual reporting done, then the more critical journalism found in some U.S. news media can be seen as the result of different journalistic ideologies that arise from different professional and political-economic arrangements, as well as the specific efforts of individual journalists whose actions are never completely determined by the general journalistic ideology that surrounds them.

In the examples cited, the *New York Times* reporters demonstrated a consistent ideology of uncritical journalism: What the Pentagon said was what they reported. Much of the mainstream, profit-driven press in the U.S. is accused of having a similar ideology, and research has shown this to generally be the case. There are simultaneous consistent patterns of professional practices and political-economic relationships: reporting that repeats government claims and news production based on profit-seeking and advertising support. Even within that general pattern, however, it is possible to find exceptions that point to an alternative journalistic ideol-

ogy. Starkey at *The Times of London* demonstrates an ideology of critical reporting despite working for a major profit-driven news organization. It is also important to consider the fact that he reports for a London-based organization; the different national context alone is a potentially powerful factor in his journalistic ideology. Froomkin of the for-profit online outlet *Huffington Post*, and formerly of the *Washington Post*, exhibits an ideology that is not obviously what research suggests would be the case. It is probably significant, however, that he was fired by the *Washington Post* and that the *Huffington Post* attempted to define itself as an alternative outlet. This still supports the argument that a journalist's social reality should be considered in its specificity if an accurate understanding of journalistic ideology is sought. Greenwald provides a similar example of this. While writing for the profit-driven, advertising-supported *Salon*, Greenwald is a consistent critica of political and economic power. The journalistic ideology of Cockburn of the reader-supported *Counterpunch* is certainly easy to contrast with that of the *New York Times* reporters.

As the difference between the *New York Times* and online U.S. news media demonstrates, there is no single journalistic ideology in the national context of the U.S. The most encompassing ideologies that can be accurately abstracted are those of the generally uncritical mainstream press and the generally critical alternative press, even though the alternative outlets analyzed here are for-profit. The comparison of *The Times of London* also suggests that, at the least, not every journalist at mainstream, for-profit news media has the journalistic ideology of uncritical reporting demonstrated by the journalists of the *New York Times*. All of this suggests that the most effective means of producing and broadening a critical journalistic ideology in any specific context would be to effect change in professional norms and the everyday behavior of journalists as well as the nature of journalistic labor and the political economy of news media.

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