

“A Tiny and Closed Fraternity of Privileged Men”: The Nixon-Agnew Antimedia Campaign and the Liberal Roots of the U.S. Conservative “Liberal Media” Critique

CHRISTOPHER CIMAGLIO
University of Pennsylvania, USA

The Nixon administration’s antimedia campaign of the late 1960s and early 1970s, led by Vice President Spiro Agnew, is often cited as a foundational moment for the conservative critique of liberal media bias in U.S. politics. Drawing on analysis of Agnew’s speeches and contemporary conservative writing on the media, this article argues that Agnew and his supporters drew substantially on arguments from liberal media reform traditions in their attacks on a liberal media elite. Conservatives’ reworking of traditionally progressive rhetoric that opposed monopoly power in media and touted the public’s rights in the media system aided in the development of an enduring populist conservative media critique that identified liberal journalists with privilege and power and conservatives with the people.

Keywords: liberal media, American conservatism, media history, media bias, media criticism

“The best TV show of 1969 didn’t win an Emmy,” American conservative intellectual John R. Coyne, Jr., wrote in 1972. “It originated in Des Moines, Iowa on November 13. The subject: the liberal bias of the national media. The star: Vice President Spiro T. Agnew” (p. 7). Spiro Agnew’s nationally televised 1969 address on network news, which became known as the “Des Moines speech,” was nothing if not dramatic:

The power of the networks . . . represents a concentration of power over American public opinion unknown in history. . . . The American people would rightly not tolerate this kind of concentration of power in government. Is it not fair and relevant to question its concentration in the hands of a tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men, elected by no one, and enjoying a monopoly sanctioned and licensed by government? (Agnew, 1969a, pp. 194–195)

Drawing on longstanding arguments for broadcasting reform (“A virtual monopoly of a whole medium of communication’ is not something a democratic people should blithely ignore. . . . The air waves do not belong to the networks; they belong to the people”), Agnew attacked newscasters as privileged Washington and New York elites out to disseminate views that “do *not* represent the views of

Christopher Cimaglio: ccimaglio@asc.upenn.edu

Date submitted: 2013–12–18

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America. . . . Perhaps it is time that the networks were made more responsive to the views of the nation and more responsible to the people they serve" (1969a, pp. 191–198).

In recent decades, the conservative critique charging the media with liberal bias has been one of the most successful and visible brands of media criticism in the United States (e.g., Alterman, 2003; Carlson, 2009). In 1969, however, the idea of a liberal media, though common among conservatives, was not nearly as prominent on the national stage as it is today. Spiro Agnew's attacks on television news have rightly been identified as a foundational moment for the conservative critique of the liberal media, as the idea of liberal media bias moved to the mainstream of public discourse (Greenberg, 2008) and "gained legitimacy from White House sanction" (Hemmer, 2010, p. 271). Aiming to gain favorable coverage for the president and his policies and to make a populist appeal to the "Silent Majority," Republicans, led by Agnew, would press consistent critiques of liberal bias in media during Richard Nixon's administration, sparking a high-profile and consequential public debate on the issue among journalists, conservatives, and observers across the political spectrum. Tom Goldstein has argued that Agnew's criticism "inalterably changed the way the media was viewed and the way the media viewed itself" (1989, p. 64).

Several of Agnew's contemporaries, however, did not see his Des Moines speech as a dramatically new or distinctly conservative form of media criticism. Rather, they pointed to a significant irony: Agnew had delivered traditionally progressive arguments for media reform in a speech attacking newscasters' left-wing bias (e.g., Hennessy, 1969; Rovere, 1969). As Richard Rovere (1969) noted in *The New Yorker*, "the ideological basis of his case was, in terms of American politics, distinctly radical" (p. 169). Agnew spoke in favor of a view of the First Amendment centered on the rights of the public and attacked the undemocratic power of monopolistic media elites. He cited landmark progressive legal opinions in *Red Lion Broadcasting Company v. FCC* (1969) and *Associated Press v. United States* (1945). Pat Buchanan, the primary author of the Des Moines speech, reportedly took many of its points from the *Columbia Journalism Review* (Safire, 1975). Importantly, this article argues, these kinds of influences were not confined to one speech: The period was marked by conservatives consistently taking up progressive arguments to critique national media.

This article examines conservative media criticism during the Nixon administration, aiming to make sense of the tension between Agnew and his supporters' vehement criticism of liberal bias in the media and their consistent use of traditionally liberal arguments. It argues that the reworking of longstanding liberal arguments for media reform was deeply implicated in the work of developing and claiming legitimacy for the Nixon-Agnew critique of journalism. Drawing on liberal media reform rhetoric enabled the administration to put together a respectable normative case against media institutions it viewed as political enemies and helped conservatives to argue that their grievances with these institutions were not narrow or partisan. More broadly, I contend, liberal arguments provided crucial ammunition for a populist conservative critique targeting a liberal media elite, a brand of media criticism that remains prevalent today.

As articulated in the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s, this critique had three primary components. First, conservatives identified their adversaries in the press as "Big Media" in need of reform from below. In doing so, they relied on critiques of media concentration and antimonopoly rhetoric—for

instance, comparing the television networks to Standard Oil and other notorious monopolists of the past and echoing left-liberal FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson's emphasis on the immense, narrowly controlled power of television. Second, they portrayed journalists as liberal elites out of touch with their Middle American viewers, pairing media reform rhetoric on the rights of the public in the media system with a populist conservative emphasis on the rights of the white working-class majority. In this narrative, journalists had failed to meet their obligation to the public because they had illegitimately sought to impose their own liberal views on their conservative audience. Finally, focusing their criticism on media institutions located in New York and Washington, Agnew and his supporters put forward an image of media power as concentrated in a liberal Eastern Establishment while leaving media power in Middle America largely unexamined.

As Matt Carlson has argued, "critical discourse about news deserves to be studied" because "discourse on journalism's form and function is a dynamic and contested realm that seeks ultimately to shape practices and perceptions around journalism" (2009, p. 261). Though conservative criticism of the media has arguably been quite successful in this effort, in terms of influencing journalists (e.g., Waldman, 2012) and influencing the public (in a September 2014 Gallup poll, for instance, 44% of respondents identified the news media as "too liberal," and 19% chose "too conservative"), its history has been underexplored in the literature (Greenberg, 2008). A closer look at liberal and leftist influences in conservative media criticism during the Nixon era contributes to our understanding of the "liberal media" critique, calling attention to a key moment in its development and significant, if largely overlooked, intellectual roots. The liberal roots of the "liberal media" critique help to explain its ability to articulate a sense of anti-elitism and victimization, suggest the importance of political power and media access for media critics, and underscore the value of taking normative arguments into account in understanding conservative media criticism.

Investigating the "Liberal Media" Critique: Background and Methods

Though the argument that American media have a liberal bias has been extremely prominent in recent decades, this claim did not always occupy such a dominant position. As David Greenberg argues, "Complaints about the press's overwhelming conservatism . . . proliferated in the first half of the twentieth century" (2008, p. 171). Democratic politicians and labor leaders routinely attacked the biased reporting of the "conservative press." A tradition of media criticism, arising from concerns about increasing commercialism and concentration in ownership and extending from the Progressive Era through the New Deal and into the 1940s and 1950s, identified publishers as monopolistic press lords who held views contrary to those of the public, stifled leftist viewpoints, and used their holdings to advance a class agenda (e.g., Blanchard, 1978; Seldes, 1938; Sinclair, 1919/2003). The 1960s also saw much criticism of the media from the left, as reformers worked to revoke the licenses of racist stations, called for greater public access to the press, and critiqued concentration (e.g., Barron, 1967; Horwitz, 1997; Johnson, 1970). When I refer to "liberal" or "leftist" arguments, I mean these traditions of media criticism and reform that warned against concentrated power in the media system and advocated for a role for the state in regulating media and for an emphasis on the right of the public to hear a diversity of views over the right of the media industry to be free of government interference.

Several scholars have briefly pointed to the parallels between Agnew's arguments and longstanding liberal arguments. Erik Barnouw noted that "a striking aspect of the Agnew attack was that it echoed liberal complaints about the monopolistic nature of the industry" (1975, p. 444), and David Greenberg observed that "with a few alterations," Agnew's speeches "could have been given by a liberal journalism-school dean" (2003, pp. 148–149). However, most of the literature on the Nixon antimedia campaign emphasizes the working relationships between the White House and the press corps and the White House's strategic efforts to stifle criticism of the president (Greenberg, 2003; Lashner, 1984; Liebovich, 2003; Porter, 1976), with less attention to the specific arguments Agnew and his supporters made. Key works on the "liberal media" critique more generally in political communication also focus on the strategic goals of conservative elites (Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Much the same can be said of critics from the left, who have often argued that while the claim of liberal media bias lacks intellectual credibility, influential conservatives have convinced journalists and much of the public that it is valid (Alterman, 2003; McChesney & Foster, 2003; Perlestein, 2003).

Although the strategic objectives behind accusations of liberal media bias are worthy of examination, analysis left at that level is insufficient for understanding the larger phenomenon. Our understanding of conservative attacks on the liberal media can be enriched by a greater focus on the rhetorical structure of arguments and by situating arguments in specific historical contexts. At first glance, critiques that identify a liberal bias in the media and those that identify a conservative bias seem to press opposite claims. However, these arguments have often shared a similar structure, identifying a handful of elites, whether the conservative publishers targeted by New Dealers or Agnew's "tiny and closed fraternity" at the networks, who control the media and propound views at odds with those of the public. As scholars have noted, the "liberal media" critique identifies conservatives as victims of such a media establishment (Perleman, 2007; Perleman, 2012) and tells a story of the "conservative masses . . . battling the establishment liberal media elite" (McChesney, 2004, p. 112). In order to understand the success of this critique, therefore, it is necessary to ask, as several scholars have, when and how conservatives could claim to represent a majority marginalized by a liberal media establishment.

David Greenberg (2008) argues that national media began to be widely perceived as liberal in large part because of their increasing support for the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. Televised images were instrumental in conveying to a national audience the brutality of the racial regime in the segregated South; national media counteracted the lack of coverage of civil rights issues and of white violence against African Americans in segregationist-controlled local media. For their part, segregationists viewed national media as a powerful foe and developed a media critique that "cast leading journalists and journalistic institutions as part of a culturally liberal elite that was biased in favor of blacks . . . and against the values of middle-class whites" (Greenberg, 2008, p. 169). As Rick Perlestein (2003) notes, network news coverage of the Chicago Police's beatings of antiwar protestors at the 1968 Democratic National Convention also spurred accusations of liberal bias (see also Hodgson, 1976). Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and others charged that the networks, sympathetic to the cause of the protestors, had edited out footage of their aggressive behavior in order to falsely portray them as innocent victims. The support for Daley and the police from viewers pushed even some journalists into accepting the argument that the media were biased, in liberal columnist Joseph Kraft's (1968) words, "towards young people [and]

minority groups” because journalists were not “rooted in the great mass of ordinary Americans” or “Middle America.”

In the late 1960s, Republicans, led by Richard Nixon, took on an increasingly populist and majoritarian tone in appealing to “Middle America” or the “Silent Majority” in an attempt to build a new Republican coalition. Political strategists, notably Kevin Phillips (1969), argued that groups like white Southerners and the Northern white working class, formerly pillars of the Democratic coalition, had been alienated by the Democrats’ elitism and support for civil rights and by the social changes of the 1960s and could be brought into the Republican camp on racial and cultural issues (Cowie, 2010; Mason, 2004). Agnew in particular became widely identified as a spokesman for Middle America, thanks to a series of high-profile speeches attacking liberal intellectuals, New Left and Black Power figures, and importantly, the media (Cowie, 2010). Drawing on contemporary narratives that portrayed journalistic institutions as biased in favor of African American and white radicals and on longstanding grievances against the media within the conservative movement (e.g., Hemmer, 2010; Nash, 1998), Spiro Agnew and the Nixon White House attacked the media elite in an effort to win over defecting white Democrats in the South and North with a racialized populist conservatism (Greenberg, 2008).

However, even if Nixon, Agnew, and their allies could profitably attack media elites, they needed to develop a language to do so, and this language did not stem solely from the right. The historian Michael Kazin (1998) has stressed the importance of leftist rhetoric in the development of populist conservatism. Conservatives, Kazin notes, “had clearly learned something from their political adversaries” as “they adapted majoritarian images once associated with industrial labor and the New Deal” (p. 167). Agnew’s indictment of “the networks in terms once used by leftists to describe corporate power in toto” (p. 251) is a case in point. Taking this insight as a starting point, this article presents an in-depth look at how liberal media reform arguments shaped the development of a populist conservative media critique during the Nixon administration. I do not mean to downplay the importance of the politics of race, or of political strategy, in the Nixon antimedia campaign; rather, I seek to show how these and other concerns were woven into a language of media criticism with liberal roots.

My analysis of conservative media criticism is based on a reading of Spiro Agnew’s major speeches on the media and influential conservative books and columns on media issues, including Edith Efron’s *The News Twisters* (1971), Joseph Keeley’s *The Left-Leaning Antenna* (1971), John R. Coyne, Jr.’s *The Impudent Snobs* (1972), Pat Buchanan’s *The New Majority* (1973), and columns by Kevin Phillips, Efron, and Buchanan in the magazine *TV Guide*, which in the mid-1970s was one of the highest-circulation periodicals in the United States and featured conservative media critics nearly weekly. Three of these authors (Buchanan, Coyne, and Phillips) had worked in the Nixon administration or for the 1968 campaign; all wrote in support of Agnew’s criticism as part of the broader debate on media bias that it generated. These sources capture the distinct media critique that emerged around the Nixon White House’s adoption of populist conservative rhetoric marked by the view that the United States had a conservative majority exploited by privileged liberal elites, including those in the media (Cowie, 2010; Kazin, 1998; McGirr, 2001). Although I sometimes refer to Agnew and these authors collectively as “conservatives,” conservatism was and is wide-ranging and varied, and I do not mean to suggest that all conservatives shared these views.

This analysis also draws on coverage of conservatives' arguments and newscasters' responses in the trade magazine *Broadcasting*, selected for its extensive coverage of conservative criticism (from the perspective of the television industry), and in *National Review*, chosen because of its status as the leading conservative magazine of the time (e.g., Nash, 1998). For additional background, I reviewed scholarly work and foundation reports on media issues (Ashmore, 1973; Barrett, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1975; Wolfson & McCartney, 1973). Finally, it is important to note that although conservative media criticism in this period also targeted Eastern elite newspapers and public broadcasting, the networks were the primary focus for Agnew and his supporters and are the primary focus of this article.

Conservatives Combat "Big Media"

"Surely this volume will be the lodestar of reform," conservative intellectual William F. Buckley, Jr., wrote in a dust jacket blurb for Edith Efron's *The News Twisters*, a bestselling 1971 critique of liberal bias in network news. "Miss Efron is the Ralph Nader of broadcasting" (Efron, 1972, p. xi). Commenting on the Des Moines speech in *National Review* two years earlier, Buckley (1969, p. 1235) had identified one question as critical: "What can the public legitimately demand from an oligopoly?" Buckley's comments are reflective of a central strategy for Agnew and his supporters: They sought to take up a reformer's mantle and speak for the people against Big Media. In constructing a reformist ideological and rhetorical case against the networks, they drew heavily on traditionally progressive arguments.

Conservatives, drawing inspiration from the antimonopoly attacks of previous generations of leftists (e.g., Kazin, 1998), consistently deployed populist language on monopoly power in media. "Only a tiny handful of men in three corporations exercise [the] enormous power" of television (p. 17), Pat Buchanan (1973) asserted. Labeling the networks "communications empires" and "communications cartels," he reported, "Network executives and correspondents are spoken of often with epithets reserved a century ago for . . . the Robber Barons of the Gilded Age" (1974, p. A-3). Joseph Keeley likened the networks to "Standard Oil and U.S. Steel" (1971, p. 61). As part of the effort to suggest a unitary and powerful interest, the administration sought to use the word "media" rather than "press" (Nolan, 2005): As Nixon aide William Safire later explained, "the word had a manipulative, Madison Avenue, all-encompassing connotation, and the press hated it" (Safire, 1975, p. 351).

The arguments made against a powerful media establishment by contemporary liberal and leftist media reformers, particularly those affiliated with the civil rights movement and the New Left (e.g., *Broadcasting*, 1970; Kellner, 1990), also influenced conservatives' media criticism. Agnew and his supporters took up contemporary progressives' critiques of media concentration and cross-ownership, the lack of sufficient regulatory oversight, the profit margins of media corporations, and television's excessive commercialism. On these points, Joseph Keeley's *The Left-Leaning Antenna* (1971) cited Ralph Nader's suggestion that FCC commissioners' likelihood of future employment in the industry they were charged with regulating amounted to a "deferred bribe" (1971) and cited Newton Minow's "vast wasteland" speech. Among contemporary leftists, conservative attacks on the networks drew particular inspiration from the dissident FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson. In his Des Moines speech, Agnew cited Johnson's contention (crediting an unnamed FCC commissioner) that the networks' power exceeded that of all

governments—federal, state, and local—combined, and as several observers noted, Agnew also echoed Johnson's arguments on increasing monopolization (*Broadcasting*, 1969a), broadcaster responsiveness to local publics (Barrett, 1970), and regulators' lack of oversight over network officials (Hennessy, 1969). Conservatives also mirrored contemporary liberal critiques alleging inadequate and prejudiced reporting on issues of race. They accused the networks of bias against African Americans (e.g., Coyne, 1972; Efron, 1971; Keeley, 1971), in several cases citing Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and Whitney Young of the National Urban League. In a chapter dedicated to "expos[ing] the racist stereotypes built into network news" (Efron, 1972, p. xxvi), for instance, Edith Efron attacked television's "obsessional focus on black criminality" and lack of interest in "normal black existence" (1971, pp. 144–146).

Liberal and leftist arguments were useful for conservative critics seeking to make a persuasive case against Big Media for several reasons. They provided ready-made, battle-tested attacks on the industry, and they lent credibility to the conservative campaign as more than a purely partisan or right-wing affair. John Coyne, for instance, took care to note Agnew's points of agreement with Nicholas Johnson, "a superdove with a hard-left tilt" (1972, p. 8). Proposals in White House memos—"Encourage the dean of a leading graduate school of journalism to publicly acknowledge that press objectivity is a serious problem"; "Arrange an in-depth analysis in a prestigious journal like the *Columbia Journalism Review*" (quoted in Barrett, 1975, pp. 214–215)—suggest a desire among aides to gain intellectual credibility for bias claims outside of conservative circles. Placing critiques of the representation of African Americans in the news alongside conservative grievances represented an attempt to forestall opponents' claims that conservative criticism had a racist intent, to claim a position of marginalization in establishment media comparable to that of black Americans, and in at least one case, to seek alliances. One high-profile conservative writer on the media, Edith Efron, explicitly sought to make common cause with left-leaning media reformers; she dedicated *The News Twisters* to "those Davids of all political persuasions who wish to fight rationally against the network Goliaths" (1971, p. 218).

This strategy was not entirely unsuccessful, as Agnew and his supporters did win some recognition from their political adversaries. To be sure, many on the left, including Nicholas Johnson himself, viewed Agnew's campaign as a threat to a free press; others maintained that all reliable evidence pointed to a conservative bias in the news media (Bagdikian, 1972; Cirino, 1971). Some, however, noted with some bemusement that a figure they typically held in low regard had made a reasonable case (e.g., Barron, 1969; Hennessy, 1969). "Some things are true even though Vice Presidents say them," left-leaning media reformer Jerome Barron wrote. For Barron, "Vast segments of the populace . . . feel that a 'liberal establishment' that operates the networks does not speak for them" (1969, pp. 766–767). This kind of grudging support is indicative of how closely Agnew's arguments resembled longstanding liberal arguments.

At the same time, it is essential to highlight three significant areas in which conservative media critics tweaked or deviated from familiar liberal arguments. First, they identified journalists, rather than owners or advertisers, as primarily responsible for biased news coverage and illegitimate use of media power. Second, they most often represented the audience as a conservative white majority that held views deeply at odds with the views propounded by liberal journalists. Third, they spotlighted media institutions located in New York and Washington for critical attention, saying little about media power

elsewhere in the country. As the next two sections discuss, all three of these differences were rooted in the intersection of liberal and leftist media reform rhetoric with the populist conservative politics of the period.

Journalism and the Silent Majority

The coupling of populist conservative rhetoric with media reform rhetoric was central to how conservative media critics sought to construct both their public and their adversaries. Broadly speaking, the populist conservatism articulated by Agnew and his contemporaries spoke on behalf of a constituency of working-class and lower-middle-class whites often identified as the "Silent Majority" or "Middle America." While this group comprised the majority of the American public, conservatives suggested, its interests had been ignored because American politics and media were dominated by vocal minorities: Black radicals, white student protestors, and white liberal cultural elites who did not share Middle Americans' mainstream values (e.g., Cowie, 2010; Kazin, 1998; Mason, 2004). Nixon (1968), for instance, identified his constituency as "the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans—the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators" (para. 26). Drawing on similar tropes, conservative media critics defined liberal journalists, portrayed as a privileged class, against their viewers, imagined as a conservative white working-class majority, and argued that journalists had wrongly sought to impose their own views on their audience. "There is no element in American life more out of touch with the concerns and beliefs of the common man than the liberal press," Pat Buchanan (1973, p. 22) insisted. As deployed by conservatives in this context, media reform arguments attacking monopoly and emphasizing the importance of the public interest in broadcasting took on a new connotation.

Majoritarian, traditionally progressive arguments touting the rights of the public in the media system found wide articulation among conservatives. "The air waves do not belong to the networks; they belong to the people," one of the most cited lines in Agnew's Des Moines speech, was a version of a refrain shared among 1940s media reformers (Pickard, 2013). Joseph Keeley exhorted his readers: "You can still exercise control over [television] by recognizing that it is your airwaves that are being used by broadcasters and by insisting that they use them in the public interest, as required by law" (1971, p. 193). Agnew (1969a) also praised the recent *Red Lion* decision, quoting Justice Byron White's firm declaration, "It is the right of the viewers and listeners, not the right of the broadcasters, which is paramount" (p. 196). It was clear to contemporaries, though, that these statements were not intended to evoke the abstract public of democratic theory but rather the imagined public of populist conservatism. As *Broadcasting* (1969b) wryly noted, "Clearly Mr. Agnew sees no constitutional obstruction to an administration's pushing television around, so long . . . as the pushing is done in the name of the viewers and listeners, who, we may next hear, are the silent majority" (p. 102).

One of the basic arguments of 1960s and 1970s populist conservatism held that, since the United States was a democracy, the preferences of the majority should hold sway (e.g., Durr, 2003). This argument was often employed to label busing and other policies intended to promote integration as undemocratic. Because liberal media reform rhetoric was also firmly majoritarian, the two could be paired to suggest that journalists had violated the rights of the public by seeking to impose an ideology that the majority of their viewers did not share. "The democratic process can be utterly destroyed if the great

majority of Americans let disruptive minorities get away with their attempts to seize control of strategic points," Joseph Keeley wrote, one page after reminding his readers that they owned the airwaves. Television, Keeley claimed, was "presenting in sympathetic terms certain concepts that are unacceptable to the great majority of conservative Americans" (1971, p. 194). As Pat Buchanan charged,

Men who are taking an increasingly adversary stance toward the social and political values, mores and traditions of the majority of Americans have also achieved monopoly control of the medium of communication upon which 60% of these Americans depend as the primary source of news and information. (1973, p. 18)

Moreover, these journalists had abandoned objectivity in favor of the "more exciting and satisfying role of pleader, partisan, and advocate" (Buchanan, 1974, p. A-4). Specific allegations that journalists sought to impose their own views on their audience centered on the networks' coverage of the war in Vietnam and the public dissent of the period. Though the debates around these issues are not the primary focus of this article, conservatives alleged that negative, distorted coverage sought to turn the public against the Vietnam War and that television news gave dangerous New Left and Black Power figures an undeserved platform.

Whatever the issue, conservative media critics depicted journalists as immensely privileged and powerful and treated their injecting of bias into the news as the primary source of illegitimate media power. "The First Amendment's guarantee of a free press was not supposed to create a privileged class of men called journalists, who are immune from criticism by government or restraint by publishers and editors," Clay T. Whitehead, head of the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, asserted in 1972 (quoted in Barrett, 1973, p. 233). Newscasters, Pat Buchanan contended, had the "nightly privilege of untrammelled access for their unchallenged views into twenty million American homes" (1973, p. 19). This portrayal of journalists marked a strong contrast with liberal and leftist media criticism, which has most often emphasized the power of owners and advertisers and, in the first half of the 20th century, most often identified journalists with the working class (Blanchard, 1978). In 1937, an American Newspaper Guild branch described journalists as "the most notoriously exploited of all producer groups in this country which require similar standards of intelligence, skill and industry" (quoted in McChesney & Scott, 2006, p. 186). In the view of most left critics, journalists had limited power over news content. In 1919's *The Brass Check*, for instance, Upton Sinclair defined "a professional journalist" as "a man who holds himself ready at a day's notice to adjust his opinions to the pocket-book of a new owner" (1919/2003, p. 248). The fact that Nixon-era conservatives focused primarily on television news, at perhaps the height of its power, explains some of this difference, but it is to a considerable extent reflective of an enduring point of divergence between populist media critiques of the right and left, as recent conservative media criticism has also tended to place primary focus on journalists' ideological bias (McChesney, 2004; Perlman, 2007).

It is not difficult, though, to hear in this brand of conservative criticism the echoes of New Deal-era liberal criticism. In 1939, for instance, New Dealer Harold Ickes had accused the "Lords of the Press" of "sacrific[ing] the general good of all the people to the special selfish advantage of a small privileged class" and claimed that newspapers were "out of sympathy with, and have different interests from, the

majority of the people" (1939, pp. viii, 8). Working with the same basic majoritarian argument structure, Agnew and his supporters substituted a journalistic elite for the press lords of old and opposed this elite to a politicized and racialized construction of the "people." To be sure, it is not fair to suggest that all conservatives excluded Americans who did not fit within the Silent Majority from their public of concern; as discussed in the previous section, several did point to network news bias against African Americans. It is also important to note that categories such as "workers," "working class," and the "common man" were predominantly represented as white and male by the New Deal-era white left. Generally, though, whereas New Deal liberals such as Ickes primarily saw "the majority of the people" as workers with shared economic interests opposed to those of publishers (e.g., Ickes, 1939), Agnew and his allies stressed cultural and ideological differences between liberal journalists and conservative white working-class viewers. The conservative proposals for reform that emerged from this period—most notably activism against the networks under the terms of the Fairness Doctrine (e.g., Efron, 1971; *National Review*, 1971), which groups such as Accuracy in Media and the American Legal Foundation would pursue in the 1970s and 1980s (Corn-Revere, 2009)—are reflective of this focus on journalists' ideological bias. Ultimately, then, the move from ownership to journalistic bias represented a move away from structural issues in media criticism.

Reforming the Eastern Establishment

Structural issues, however, were not entirely absent in the Nixon-Agnew critique: They were present, but they were raised selectively. "Monopoly" was a key term for Agnew and his allies, but their critiques of media concentration focused almost exclusively on the networks and elite Eastern newspapers, for two primary reasons. Targeting the Eastern Establishment kept the heat on the administration's political opponents, leaving its political allies in the media industry—often smaller-market media companies, particularly in the South and Midwest (e.g., Lewis, 2010)—somewhat removed from the crosshairs. More generally, it bolstered a populist conservative view of class power in the United States that opposed Middle America and Eastern liberal elites.

Initially, Agnew's emphasis on concentrated power was purely rhetorical. His Des Moines speech had essentially advocated self-regulation—that media elites "turn their critical powers on themselves" to examine and correct their bias (Agnew 1969a). In the ensuing years, however, the White House proposed a series of policies intended to weaken the networks structurally, including moving to limit the airing of reruns and threatening local broadcasters with consequences at license renewal time for airing "biased" national news (Ashmore, 1973; Wolfson & McCartney, 1973). Nixon's Department of Justice filed antitrust lawsuits against the networks in April 1972, accusing them of "monopolizing prime-time entertainment with their own programs" (Pincus & Lardner, 1997, para. 14). A 1971 comment about these lawsuits captured on the Watergate tapes makes clear Nixon's intent: "Our game here is solely political. . . . As far as screwing them is concerned, I'm very glad to do it" (Pincus & Lardner, 1997, para. 7). As a later study (Lashner, 1984) found, administration rhetoric and the threat of regulation had an effect in shaping television coverage in a pro-Nixon direction. However, as the administration worked to use its regulatory authority for political purposes, arguments on behalf of an affirmative role for government in broadcasting policy could cast these efforts as necessary steps toward reform. In a particularly striking example, Kevin Phillips argued that the First Amendment was "obsolescent" in the television age—unable to "cope with Big

Media power. This invites—and even obliges—the government to move in” (quoted in Ashmore, 1973, p. 11).

Though the networks received the bulk of the rhetorical criticism and regulatory threats, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* came in for similar treatment. In a speech delivered in Birmingham, Alabama (a highly symbolic location that appealed to a notion of the South as a victim of Big Media power), Agnew (1969b) attacked “the trend toward the monopolization of the great public information vehicles and the concentration of more and more power in fewer and fewer hands” (p. 200), citing *The Washington Post* for cross-ownership issues. However, as one journalist complained, Agnew ignored “the very obvious examples of news media concentration surrounding him when he spoke”: Two newspaper chains, Newhouse and Scripps-Howard, owned multiple daily newspapers and television stations in Alabama (Mintz, 1970, pp. 13–14). Moreover, at the time of the speech, the administration supported a bill championed by newspaper chains that would exempt certain monopolistic papers from antitrust regulations. It is not coincidental that the local and regional dailies overlooked by Agnew had often been targeted by liberal critics. When Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson famously complained of the “one-party press” during the 1952 campaign, he directed his charge at “the great majority” of newspapers, “not the enlightened ten per cent” (quoted in Safire, 1975, p. 341).

Conservatives tended to see those “enlightened” 10% as the problem, as Agnew’s contemporaries placed a similar emphasis on elite Eastern media. Joseph Keeley’s critique of the concentration of television news production in a “one-mile radius in midtown Manhattan” (1971, p. 66) squared with an earlier chapter’s rendering of newscasters as “city slickers.” *TV Guide*’s weekly News Watch column, which began in 1974 and featured media criticism from Edith Efron, Pat Buchanan, and Kevin Phillips, among others, is particularly indicative of how a sole focus on the Eastern Establishment elided class power elsewhere. Only *TV Guide* and *Reader’s Digest*, Phillips suggested in a 1974 column, “mass periodical[s] with roots in Middle America rather than Washington-New York liberal media circles,” counteracted Big Media’s attempts at “curbing the public’s ‘right to know’ about their own finances” (1974b, p. A-4). As Phillips used the term, the “media” did not include *TV Guide*, which was at the time the largest paid circulation magazine in the United States, with a circulation of 19.7 million in 1975 (Rose, 2000), and was owned by Walter Annenberg, a donor and fundraiser for Nixon who was sympathetic to administration views on Eastern media (Altschuler & Grossvogel, 1992). In limiting their focus to “Washington-New York liberal media circles,” conservatives offered a somewhat narrow portrait of the media system that obscured the conservatism of many publishers, owners, and executives and the reach of their media.

The Legacy of Agnew

Watergate changed the calculus around the Nixon administration antimedia campaign dramatically. “Certainly Mr. Agnew and his colleagues have not pressed their attacks in recent months—or been in much of a position to do so,” *Broadcasting* (1973, p. 98) noted on June 18, 1973. In October of that year, Agnew pleaded guilty to tax evasion and stepped down, with *Variety* (1973) reporting that “the nation’s most famous media critic has resigned” (p. 25). In July of 1974, Kevin Phillips (1974a) noted regretfully that “the question of media bias” had begun to “rise or fall on the basic veracity of media

Watergate charges" (p. A-3). The Watergate investigation turned up memos and tapes that revealed explicit attempts to punish media enemies (e.g., Barrett, 1975) and lent credence to the networks' claims that the entire episode had been a campaign of intimidation.

That does not mean, however, that the arguments conservatives put forward during this period were put to rest. Rather, Agnew and his contemporaries greatly informed later conservative attacks on the liberal media. In 1987, Phyllis Schlafly, who had employed the Fairness Doctrine to seek equal time in her campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment, defended the policy in Congressional testimony as "a small restraint on the monopoly power wielded by big TV media" and castigated the networks as "robber barons of modern America, who exercise monopoly control over news and information" (quoted in Perlman, 2012, p. 357). In 1992, another Republican vice president, Dan Quayle, took aim at a "cultural elite" that he saw as seeking to subvert the moral values of the majority of Americans (Rosenthal, 1992). Resonances between media criticism of the left and of the right also consistently reappeared, particularly on issues related to corporate media power. Defenders of the Fairness Doctrine in the mid-1980s included Ralph Nader, Phyllis Schlafly, the liberal People for the American Way, and the conservative National Rifle Association (Corn-Revere, 2009; Saddler, 1985). A similarly diverse set of organizations came together in 2003 to oppose the loosening of FCC policy on ownership restrictions (Scott, 2004).

Much has changed in conservative criticism of the media since Nixon. The critics who led the charge against the networks in the mid-1970s mainly supported the Fairness Doctrine and hoped to see a more activist FCC. Today, arguments for public ownership of the airwaves and a role for government in regulating the media system would find few adherents among American conservatives. In the 1980s, conservatives split over the Fairness Doctrine; while some supported the policy as a bulwark against liberal bias, others favored its removal. Since the rise of talk radio and other conservative alternative media, support for deregulation has grown, and regulatory initiatives are often framed as attempts to remove conservative voices from the air (Perlman, 2012).

However, though the media regime of the early 1970s is long past, several of the elements of Agnew and his contemporaries' populist conservative media critique—the righteous majority public wronged by privileged elites, the misconduct of condescending journalists, the Eastern Big Media—remain prominent and powerful. Ann Coulter has written against "the opinion cartel" and "the monopoly media" (e.g., Coulter, 2002); S. E. Cupp (2010) has counterposed the "media elite" to "hardworking Middle America . . . and religious America—which is the overwhelming majority of people in this country" (p. 169) and identified the media's attempts to "overthrow God, and silence Christian America for good" as a "class war" (p. 2). Mike Huckabee's recent culture-wars text (2015) prods "coastal media elites" (p. 237) who "live comfortably in their 'bubble' and rarely socialize with the hoi polloi" (p. 143). Like *TV Guide* in the 1970s, many of today's conservative media figures and institutions have sought to position themselves as voices of Middle America. Rush Limbaugh has identified his success as proof of "middle America's growing rejection of the elites" (quoted in Brooks, 1996, p. 308). In 2013, former Agnew speechwriter John R. Coyne, Jr., who had authored *The Impudent Snobs* in 1972, reviewed a biography of Fox News president Roger Ailes for *The American Spectator*. When Ailes and Rupert Murdoch launched Fox News, Coyne wrote, "the Silent Majority found its voice" (para. 32).

Conclusion

This history suggests that the rise of the idea of a liberal media was not a sea change from the earlier truism of a conservative press; rather, it was in part a subtle alteration of much of the same rhetoric. Recognizing the liberal roots of the "liberal media" critique is important for several reasons. First, it helps to explain the power of conservative media criticism, which stems in no small part from the sense of victimization and anti-elitism it articulates (Perlman, 2007). Prior to the rise of an increasingly majoritarian, populist strand of conservatism in the mid-to-late 1960s, American conservatism had often demonstrated an elitist tenor and a "deep ambivalence toward popular democracy" (McGirr, 2001, p. 131). Antimonopoly rhetoric that opposed the people to powerful media and the idea of public ownership of the airwaves enriched this emerging majoritarian brand of conservatism, helping conservatives to articulate a critique of power in the media system that positioned them as representatives of the people combating an elite.

Second, this study points to a basic irony with regard to media criticism: The critics (and critiques) who have the most success are often the ones given the biggest platform by the media. "Vice President Agnew is a welcome recruit to the undermanned ranks of press critics," a *Nation* contributor wrote in 1970. "For one thing, he brings to the task a much needed ability to command public attention" (Barnett, 1970, p. 72). While Agnew generated a high level of visibility for claims against corporate media power, this visibility stemmed largely from the political power of the presidency. As vice president, Agnew's public statements were news, and he could access the media when he wanted. The same papers that had given scant space to liberal-media-reform reports featured him on the front page for days in a row (Cirino, 1971). Then as now, conservative elites' relative success in claiming a victimized position in the media system should be seen as due to, rather than in spite of, their ability to gain access to media and shape news narratives. This stems partly from the deference journalists typically show to government and party officials and from their efforts to portray a range of elite opinions; in more recent years, this access also comes from right-leaning media outlets (Fox News first and foremost) that are often left out of the "media" in critiques of liberal media bias.

Similarly, this case study underscores the value of populist or reformist appeals for powerful political actors. As scholars have argued, media criticism plays an important role within a democratic media system—it serves as a "civilizing voice" or "journalistic conscience" (Marzolf, 1991); it "raises issues, poses questions, and encourages dialogue" (Wyatt, 2007, p. 2). A sitting vice president taking up the position of "journalistic conscience" to legitimate an attempt to intimidate newsrooms into more favorable coverage of the president is a unique incident in U.S. history, but it does provide a reminder that power can hide behind a reformist pose and that populist critiques are rarely destabilizing and often advantageous to political elites or to commercial media, as long as they remain directed at political opponents.

Finally, these findings suggest that scholars should not treat conservative media criticism as a simple strategic play with no relevant normative content. Rather, the normative arguments Agnew and his supporters made were an integral part of their strategy, and particularly central were their efforts to borrow useful material from their political opponents. The Nixon-Agnew antimedia campaign was launched

to pursue short-term political gain, but the arguments that grew up around it left a legacy that has extended far beyond the careers of Agnew and Nixon. Due in no small part to the efforts of Agnew and his contemporaries, the idea of the “liberal media”—and its associated arguments—will likely remain a part of American political discourse for years to come.

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