

Foes or Friends?
The Media Communication of Kennedy, Nixon, Obama, and Trump

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In memory of my mother

**Papa and Seb,
this book is dedicated to you.**

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List of Abbreviations

ABC	American Broadcasting Company
ACA	Affordable Care Act (Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act)
ANPA	American Newspaper Publishers Association
ASNE	American Society of Newspaper Editors
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
CNN	Cable News Network
CRP/CREEP	Committee to Re-Elect the President
DNC	Democratic National Committee
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
IRS	Internal Revenue Service
JFKL	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum
MSNBC	Microsoft National Broadcasting Company
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
OANN/OAN	One America News Network
RMNL	Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library and Museum
RNC	Republican National Committee
VCR	Video Cassette Recording
WHO	World Health Organization

I. Introduction

The Fake News hates me saying that they are the Enemy of the People only because they know it's TRUE. I am providing a great service by explaining this to the American People.¹

“Fake News” and “Enemy of the People” are among the most well-known accusations against the media by the author of this tweet. From these signature allegations the reader can probably infer that the statement was written by Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States. In the same tweet, Trump went on to explain what exactly the enemy is responsible for: “They purposely cause great division & distrust. They can also cause War! They are very dangerous & sick!”²

The picture he painted is apparent. On the one side were Trump and the American people. On the other side were their enemy, the “fake news” media who posed an imminent danger to the country. The accused media disagreed. They also saw a confrontation, but one with reversed roles. Rather than being the threat themselves, the media saw one in the president. Even before Trump took office, *The Washington Post* journalist Margaret Sullivan called on her colleagues “to keep doing our jobs of truth-telling, challenging power and holding those in power accountable [...] We have to be willing to fight back.” Sullivan even wondered if the First Amendment would prove to be “any kind of defense against executive power run amok.”³ For the media, Trump represented a peril to a central principle: the freedom of the press.

For a functioning democracy, a free press is indispensable. This centuries-old institution monitors the government and “as the primary, daily conduit between the public and its government” keeps citizens informed about their government’s actions to evaluate whether it operates in their interest.⁴ It has been confirmed in court decisions again and again that

¹ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on August 05, 2018, 7:38 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive*, www.thetrumparchive.com (accessed March 5, 2023). The *Trump Twitter Archive* is a searchable archive of all tweets by @realDonaldTrump. Since the link to the archive is the same for all tweets, it is omitted in further citations. Although Trump’s personal *Twitter* account is now again accessible on the platform, the account was suspended and thus access blocked until shortly before the submission of the thesis. For this reason, the *Trump Twitter Archive* had to be used for the research and it is, thus, indicated as the source for Trump’s tweets.

² Ibid.

³ Margaret Sullivan, “A Call to Action for Journalists Covering President Trump,” *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-call-to-action-for-journalists-in-covering-president-trump/2016/11/09/a87d4946-a63e-11e6-8042-f4d111c862d1_story.html (accessed March 7, 2023).

⁴ Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha, “Presidential Influence of the News Media: The Case of the Press Conference,” *Political Communication*, 30, no. 4 (2013), 548–64: 549.

“the press was to serve the governed, not the governors.”⁵ Courts and scholars stress the importance of a free press and even though “in theory, America’s presidents [...] have often said they wanted a free press as a check on government. In practice, most of them have found such media independence difficult to tolerate.”⁶ Faced with an often critical press, the relationship has not always been characterized by friendly interactions. More precisely, the relation between Presidents of the United States and the press has been difficult for centuries.⁷ And as the quote above showed, so it was for the 45th President of the United States.

Trump frequently attacked the media or portrayed them as his foe. The news media picked up on these attacks and it is therefore easy to find stories about Trump’s charged relationship with and his aggressive communication style towards every media outlet that does not share his standpoint. The vast amount of media coverage of Trump leads to the impression that his communication with the media must have been completely different from that of his predecessors.

To assess the accuracy of this impression, Trump’s media communication needs to be examined from a historical perspective. For this purpose, this dissertation analyses and compares the media communication of four Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, Richard M. Nixon, Barack H. Obama and Donald J. Trump.

The analysis focuses on two main dimensions of presidential media communication: press conferences and the adaptation of a new communication medium. Press conferences are one of the main and longest existing direct communication channels between media representatives and presidents. The basic setting of one of the most integral parts of presidential media communication has remained very similar since John F. Kennedy. Nevertheless, presidents have used press conferences in very different ways and thus the individual handling of this means of communication offers an excellent point of comparison. From their unique approaches to press conferences alone, much can be learned about their individual attitude towards the media.

An important dimension of presidential media communication is the continuous adaptation of novel communication channels. The unifying motive behind the adoption of such

⁵ Supreme Court of the United States, *New York Times Co. V. United States*, 403 U.S. 713 (1971), <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep403/usrep403713/usrep403713.pdf> (accessed June 2, 2022), 717.

⁶ Betty Houchin Winfield, *FDR and the News Media* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 3.

⁷ Dialynn Dwyer, “Presidents vs. The Press: What Came Before Trump’s ‘Running War’ with the Media,” *Boston.com*, February 25, 2017, <https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2017/02/25/presidents-vs-the-press-what-came-before-trumps-running-war-with-the-media> (accessed November 6, 2020).

channels is the circumvention of the established news media. The presidents aim to directly communicate with their constituency without the media as a filter. Their approaches to new technology effect their media relationship.

For a profound study of the two dimensions, every president's media communication is analyzed in detail. Each of the four analyses comprises four steps. In the first step, the president's relationship with the media and his media strategy is looked at in general. In the second step, his overall strategy for press conferences is examined, before his general approach to using a new medium is studied in the third step. In the fourth and final step, an in-depth analysis of the president's press conferences and his employment of the new medium during a particularly challenging period of the presidency is conducted. This step includes a detailed analysis and discussion of the context of this high-pressure period.

This framework allows to base the subsequent comparison of the four presidents on a well-founded analysis of each of the presidents and provides the essential groundwork necessary for deep insights and general conclusions drawn from this comparison. The overall analysis is structured chronologically, starting with John F. Kennedy and ending with Donald J. Trump.

This thesis uses the historical comparison as the main methodological approach. The historical comparison permits to differentiate between specific characteristics of each president's media interaction and general rules of presidential media communication. Moreover, it reveals similarities and differences in the presidents' media communication and highlights new phenomena. Ultimately, the combination of individual analyses and comparison allows to answer the central questions of this thesis: What made each president's media communication special? What were new opportunities the changing media environment provided each president with and how made they use of it? Was Trump's media communication unprecedented? Or were discussions and medial outrage in response to Trump's media communication exaggerated?

While answering the above questions will put Donald Trump's media communication into perspective, an adversarial attitude towards the media is not confined to the United States of America. In recent years, media and journalists have been attacked in other democracies as well. For example, in Germany, the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) frequently collided with the media during the last decade. In particular, the base of the party defames the media as "Lügenpresse" (lying press). Recently, this term could also be heard in the crowd of the so-called "Aufstand für den Frieden" (Uprising for Peace) organized by left-wing politician Sahra Wagenknecht and

feminist journalist Alice Schwarzer.⁸ This example shows that political communication is a crucially relevant topic not only in American society but also worldwide.

As chief of the executive, head of state, as well as commander-in-chief in one person, the President of the United States of America has a powerful position that is at the same time very independent from the legislative branch. With a fixed term in office and impeachment (or even conviction) being very unlikely, the president is “less immediately accountable to the people” or anyone for that matter.⁹ Due to this highly exposed position of the American president in contrast to the position of leaders in parliamentary systems, this office is particularly suited for a detailed analysis of current developments in political communication and the relationship of governmental leaders with the media. In this way, the results of the thesis will not only give deep insight into presidential media communication in recent history but hopefully also help to better understand like-minded politicians and contribute to a more fact-based debate around current developments in political media communication in general.

1. Structure and Sources

The dissertation is divided into nine parts. Parts are subdivided into chapters. Part I introduces the topic and gives insights into the structure of the thesis as well as the selected sources. Part II provides an overview about theoretical conceptions and the methodological approach. Chapter II.1 goes into detail on comparisons and the method of the historical comparison. The selection process for the evaluation period and the presidents is elaborated on in Chapter II.2 Chapter II.3 gives theoretical conceptions on political communication. It starts by evaluating the scholarly debate on the definition and important aspects of political communication. After the term political communication is defined, the chapter deals with the three main actors of political communication: the leader, the media, and the public. Part III of the thesis puts the theoretical conceptions of political communication in the context of the United States of America. Chapter III.1 looks at the history of presidential communication, the president-media relationship as well as the development of presidential press conferences. Chapter III.2 goes into detail on the media

⁸ “Frieden Mit Putins Russland: Eine Illusion? | February 27, 2023 | Video,” *hartaberfair*, <https://www1.wdr.de/daserste/hartaberfair/videos/video-frieden-mit-putins-russland-eine-illusion-100.html> (accessed March 5, 2023), 20:10-20:46. Organizers and demonstrators demanded peace negotiations instead of arms deliveries for Ukraine in the currently ongoing War between Russia and Ukraine.

⁹ John J. Patrick, *Understanding Democracy: A Hip Pocket Guide* (New York, NY: University of Oxford Press, 2006), 76–78.

in the U.S. In particular, the development of the media environment over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries and the effects of the changing media environment on the presidents' communication with the media are analyzed. Chapter III.3 analyzes the U.S. public. It covers the trust of Americans in government, the media and each other and the effect of this trust on political communication.

Parts IV to VII are the main analysis parts of the dissertation, where the four presidents' media communication is examined in detail. Important biographical information on the presidents is given at the beginning of the respective parts.

Part VIII compares the media communication of the four presidents based on the prior in-depth analysis. This part evaluates their actions from a historical perspective and assesses similarities and differences of the presidents' media communication. At the end of the comparison, the first two questions of the thesis are answered.

The final conclusions are presented in Part IX. This part gives a review of the results of the analysis and provides the answers to the remaining two key questions of the thesis.

The most important primary sources for this thesis are official documentations of presidential press conferences, addresses, statements, and social media posts. The official documentations that were analyzed include transcripts, as well as audio and video recordings. As the amount of available primary sources is vast, sources were narrowed down by selecting and focusing on a period for each president that was challenging for their leadership. During such trying times, the stakes are high and controversial decisions must frequently be made such that presidents are confronted with particularly fierce political opposition and critical media coverage. Presidents are often measured by these periods of their presidency. These high-pressure situations put their media communication skills to test and show whether specific communications mechanisms work. Facing scrutiny from the media, presidents often feel the need to fight back and intensify their response to critical media coverage. This presents a more honest picture of the president's attitude towards the media and reveals much of the true status of the president-media relationship.

For Kennedy, the Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis represent two crises where he was under enormous pressure. Although they are of relatively short duration, they were of major significance during the Cold War. Watergate ended Nixon's presidency and by that became the defining crisis of his time in office. Although the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act was a major legislative achievement for Barack Obama, he

encountered frequent and harsh criticism of and fierce resistance towards his proposed and later enacted legislation. The COVID-19 pandemic became an unforeseen high pressure crisis during Donald Trump's presidency, which is often stated as a major factor in his unsuccessful reelection campaign.

Since the concept of joint press conferences did not exist during the presidencies of Kennedy and Nixon, only the solo press conferences of Obama and Trump are used for the analysis of the dimension of the press conferences. In the first step, all solo press conferences of the four presidents were reviewed and categorized according to the topics they covered. In the second step, press conferences in which correspondents asked questions related to the challenging period were selected. The presidents' interactions with the media on these questions are then analyzed. In addition, questions on other topics are included as well when they are beneficial for the analysis.

For the dimension of the adaptation of novel communication channels to circumvent the media, Kennedy's two addresses to the nation on the Cuban Missile Crisis and Nixon's four addresses to the nation on Watergate are analyzed. For Obama and Trump, their social media presence is analyzed for this dimension. Here, the Obama White House social media accounts on *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube* are used, supplemented by the press secretary's *Twitter* account. For Trump, his personal *Twitter* account @realDonaldTrump was selected. Using *The Obama White House Social Media Archive* and the *Trump Twitter Archive*, the two presidents' social media posts on health care reform or the Affordable Care Act and the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively, were reviewed and the posts were categorized for the analysis.

In cases where it was deemed relevant to the analysis, other forums such as speeches or question-and-answer sessions were included.

These sources are supplemented by two types of primary sources: internal documents of the administrations and publications by White House staff. Evaluations by scholars are used for the theoretical framework and to evaluate the presidents' and the media's assessments of their relationship. Due to the time that has passed since Kennedy's and Nixon's presidencies, there are more internal documents available for these presidencies than for the ones of Obama and Trump. Thus, for the 44th and 45th president, the scholarly and journalistic analysis of their media communication play a slightly bigger role than internal documents. However, as the main analysis is largely based on primary sources that are equally available for all presidents, this difference in available internal documents is not instrumental.

Another important class of sources are reports from eyewitnesses as for example the memoirs of presidents or their staff. When analyzing sources of eyewitnesses, one must keep in mind that these are, per definition, subjective. This means that the author might sometimes pursue a narrative of the situation that is favorable for him or her. Nevertheless, eyewitness reports are invaluable sources, as they provide insights into the events from the point of view of those involved; a point of view that is otherwise inaccessible. To make fair usage of eyewitness reports in this thesis, they are compared to and complemented with other sources to arrive at a detailed but objective point of view.

The presidents' everyday interactions with the media also influence their relationship. For this reason, everyday interactions are also analyzed in the thesis. They are covered in overview chapters that also look at the media strategy of the respective president. Assessments and experiences by journalists are consulted to represent the view from the media on the everyday interactions.

For illustration purposes photographs and graphs are used at times during the analysis.

II. Theory and Methods

1. “It’s Like Comparing Apples and Oranges!”

“It’s like comparing apples and oranges” is an often used saying when it comes to comparisons. It implies that the items to be compared are impossible to compare. Yet, it is often used incorrectly, denouncing the value of well-founded comparisons.¹⁰ In the following, this fruity assertion will help to derive needed prerequisites of comparisons.

Before a comparison can be performed, two main aspects need to be determined: The comparata and the tertium comparationis. Comparata are the units that are supposed to be compared.¹¹ They need to have at least one commonality.¹² In the example of apples and oranges, it would be the fact that both are fruits. Within the framework of this thesis, Donald Trump’s media communication is assessed by going back in modern presidential history and comparing his press interaction with that of former presidents John F. Kennedy, Richard M. Nixon, and Barack H. Obama. The comparata are hence the four presidents. The commonality of them is that all four held the position of the President of the United States. As the comparison focuses on their time in office, this is not only the most prominent but also the most significant commonality.¹³

Tertium comparationis translates to “the third element in comparison.” There are different ways to describe what it represents. *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Foreign Terms in English* describes it as “the factor that links or is the common ground between [...] elements in comparison.”¹⁴ Oliver Freiberger states that it “is the point in view of which” the comparata are being examined in contrast.¹⁵ Hartmut von Sass puts it best by saying that “different items [...] are compared in relation to one respect (tertium comparationis).”¹⁶ Going back to fruits, one might compare apples and oranges regarding

¹⁰ Angelika Epple, Walter Erhart and Johannes Grave, eds., *Practices of Comparing: Towards a New Understanding of a Fundamental Human Practice* (Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2020), 11.

¹¹ Ulrike Davy et al., “Praktiken Des Vergleichs. Working Paper Des SFB 1288: Working Paper 3 - Grundbegriffe Für Eine Theorie Des Vergleichens. Ein Zwischenbericht,” *Universität Bielefeld*, <https://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/record/2939563> (accessed November 11, 2021), 4–5; Oliver Freiberger, *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 94.

¹² Ulrike Davy et al., “Praktiken des Vergleichs. Working Paper des SFB 1288,” 6. The author translated the in the source used German word “Gleichartigkeit” with commonality.

¹³ If valuable for the analysis, events prior to their presidencies are included in the analysis.

¹⁴ Jennifer Speake and Mark LaFlaur, *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Foreign Terms in English*, Online Version (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 104.

¹⁶ Hartmut von Sass, “Incomparability: A Tentative Guide for the Perplexed,” in *Practices of Comparing: Towards a New Understanding of a Fundamental Human Practice*, ed. Angelika Epple, Walter Erhart and Johannes Grave, 87–109 (Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2020), 89.

their vitamin C content.¹⁷ In this thesis, the presidents are compared in relation to their media communication. Thus, the tertium comparationis is the presidents' media policy. Comparisons have various advantages. They can "identify problems and questions that would otherwise be impossible or difficult to pose" and can thereby help to explain historical phenomena. As comparisons can also shine a new light on examined cases, they can lead to reassessment of what seemed to be established. Furthermore, it is possible to identify the specific characteristics of each historical unit, to uncover "pseudo-explanations" and also to derive and investigate generalizations.¹⁸

After establishing a general definition of comparison and why it is useful, it is time to show how to use it to answer the research questions of this thesis. For the comparison of presidential media communication, it must be considered that the presidents lived during different times with different historical circumstances. For this reason, the method of the historical comparison is used. In an article on comparative and transnational history, Hartmut Kaelble defines it

as a systematic confrontation of two or several historical units (localities, regions, nations, civilisations, personalities, institutions or eras) for exploring differences and similarities, divergences and convergences not only by describing, but also by explaining and typification. In addition, one crucial goal of historical comparison has always been the inclusion of the wider historical context, different contexts as well as common contexts.¹⁹

A big strength of the historical comparison is mentioned by Kaelble in the last sentence: A historical comparison embeds the analysis in its historical context. When looking for differences and similarities, the context provided for the analysis needs to be broader than when searching only for differences.²⁰ Therefore, the historical context is highly relevant for the topic of this thesis. For example, without including developments of the media environment, their influence on the presidents' interactions with the media would be

¹⁷ Epple, Erhart and Grave, *Practices of Comparing*, 11.

¹⁸ Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka, *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, Incorporated, 2010), 3–4.

¹⁹ Hartmut Kaelble, "Comparative and Transnational History," *Ricerche di Storia Politica*, Speciale (2017), 15–24: 20. When contrasting the definition of the historical comparison of Hartmut Kaelble, "Comparative and Transnational History," *Ricerche di Storia Politica*, Speciale (2017), 15–24: 20, to the one from Kaelble's book *Der historische Vergleich: Eine Einführung zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 1999), 12, one major difference becomes evident. The strong focus on societies or nation states as units of comparisons has faded and units have been expanded by, for instance, personalities. Kaelble himself directly addresses this change in newer publications as "Historischer Vergleich," *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, August 14, 2012, https://docupedia.de/zg/Historischer_Vergleich (accessed January 30, 2020), and "Comparative and Transnational History," *Ricerche di Storia Politica*, Speciale (2017), 15–24. This further supports the use of the method for a comparison of Presidents of the United States, who are undeniably historical personalities.

²⁰ Hartmut Kaelble, *Der Historische Vergleich: Eine Einführung Zum 19. Und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 1999), 142–43.

neglected, which in turn could lead to wrong conclusions. The historical context provided for the analysis is largely based on secondary literature and covers more extended time periods to give adequate background information for the analysis of the presidents' media communication.

A historical comparison can be approached in various ways.²¹ In this dissertation, each president's media communication is examined with equal intensity and key characteristics in their media communication considering the respective historical context are determined. An important concept in studying historical developments is the concept of functional equivalents. This concept was championed by renowned sociologist Robert K. Merton for functional analysis.²² He argued that "the same object can have more than one function, [and] the same function can be fulfilled in different ways by alternative objects."²³ For Niklas Luhmann, this concept became vital in his *Äquivalenzfunktionalismus* (equivalence functionalism): "Structures or processes are functionally equivalent whenever there is a limitational relationship between them such that the elimination of one functional equivalent contributes to the probability of the occurrence of the others."²⁴ Therefore, functional equivalents are structures or objects that can perform similar functions, yet they themselves are different. The concept enables their comparison by looking at their functions and "the ability to compare determines a gain in knowledge by distancing from the object."²⁵

For this thesis, the medium social media and the medium television are functional equivalents. In the setting of the thesis, for the presidents, they both fulfill the function of instruments of direct communication with the American public without the media as a filter. For example, with social media messages Obama and Trump could circumvent the media, similarly, televised addresses to the nation allowed Kennedy and Nixon to do so.

²¹ Hartmut Kaelble, "Historischer Vergleich," *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, August 14, 2012, https://docupedia.de/zg/Historischer_Vergleich (accessed January 30, 2020).

²² Corinna Lüthje, "Funktionale Analyse Mittlerer Reichweite Als Methode Neuer Kulturgeschichtlicher Kommunikationsforschung: Methodologisch-Erkenntnistheoretische Begründung Und Anwendungsbeispiele," *Studies in Communication and Media*, 2, no. 2 (2013), 143–97: 151–2.

²³ Robert K. Merton, "Funktionale Analyse: Wege Zur Kodifikation Der Funktionalen Analyse in Der Soziologie," in *Moderne Amerikanische Soziologie: Neuere Beiträge zur Soziologischen Theorie*, ed. Heinz Hartmann, 119–50 (Stuttgart: Enke, 1967), 133. Translation by the author.

²⁴ Morten Knudsen, "Surprised by Method - Functional Method and Systems Theory," *Historical Social Research*, 36, no. 1 (2011), 124–42: 128; Niklas Luhmann, "»Nomologische Hypothesen«, Funktionale Äquivalenz, Limitationalität: Zum Wissenschaftstheoretischen Verständnis Des Funktionalismus," *Soziale Systeme*, 16, no. 1 (2010), 3–27: 19. Translation by the author.

²⁵ Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung: Aufsätze Zur Theorie Sozialer Systeme 1* (Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1970), 13, 36. Translation by the author.

2. Evaluation Period and Selection of Presidents

Having just explained the methodology of the work, now the scope and the specific objects to be compared must be defined.

The evaluation period for the comparison starts with the rise of television after the Second World War and ends after the presidency of Donald Trump. This timeframe covers the emergence of two mediums (television and social media) that remain highly relevant to this date. Although it emerged in the last century, the medium radio is not included in the analysis. This decision is based on the fact that in contrast to television and social media, the importance of radio for presidential media communication has declined over the past decades. As television continues to be of great importance for presidential media communication today, the focus not only increases the general comparability but also provides opportunities for valuable results for a comparison with Donald J. Trump.

From the predecessors covered by this timeframe, three were chosen based on three selection criteria. First, the thesis focuses on the adaptation of a new communication medium. Therefore, the presidents had to be in office when new technology was gaining ground. Second, equal representation of party lines was emphasized for a balanced picture. Thus, the overall analysis should include two Republican and two Democratic presidents. Third, the analysis was supposed to have presidents with good and bad media relations as an enriching aspect for the comparison.

Based on these criteria, John F. Kennedy, Richard M. Nixon, and Barack H. Obama were chosen. Kennedy is famous for his press conferences and proficient usage of television as well as his good media relations. Nixon's aversion towards the media and his impeachment were similar to the Trump presidency. Obama, as Trump's immediate predecessor, had to deal with a very similar media environment and used social media in a pioneering way.

After having established the methodology and the objects of comparison, the following chapter looks at theoretical conceptions and the three protagonists of political communication.

3. “*The Golden Triangle of Political Communication*”

In an ideal world, elites would use the communications media to inform and influence people, helping them improve their lot in life, and to also put aside their personal interests to work for the common good. In an ideal world, the news media would be a positive force, helping people comprehend political issues more deeply and critically. In an ideal world, the public would be enriched and invigorated by its participation in the political communication process.²⁶

Even if reality does not live up to this ideal, the quote shows the importance of political communication for democracies.²⁷ Yet, as simple as the term might sound, as hard it is to define. According to Brian McNair, the term confronts scholars with the problem that “both components of the phrase are themselves open to a variety of definitions, more or less broad.”²⁸

To begin with, it is important to note that political communication is not reduced to verbal or written communication. Political communication also includes visual aspects.²⁹ These are, for example, the clothing of a person but also to the communication with or through photographs, through video or staging of appearances.

Furthermore, political communication is intentional, or – as McNair defines political communication – “purposeful communication about politics.”³⁰ Similarly, David Helfert stresses the intent, but argues that “every phrase, every word, every syllable is intended to convince people.”³¹ Generally, it can be agreed with Helfert, yet not all political communication is or should be intended to convince people. For politicians or advocacy groups this is surely true but – at least in the ideal world – not all media reports are supposed to convince people. Think for example of neutral news reports in contrast to editorials.

An important aspect is stressed by Richard Perloff. His understanding of political communication is more process-oriented. He defines it “as the process by which a nation’s leadership, media, and citizenry exchange and confer meaning upon messages that relate to the conduct of public policy.” Political communication “does not happen automatically.”

²⁶ Richard M. Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), 11–12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, Fifth edition (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 3.

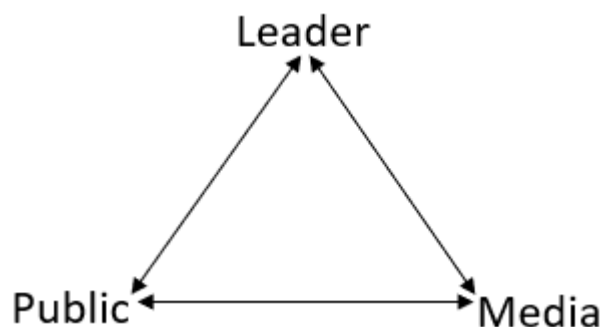
²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ David L. Helfert, *Political Communication in Action: From Theory to Practice* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc, 2018), 16.

It is a rather complex process because messages are not only exchanged but interpreted and each participant of the process can influence the others.³²

There are three main elements of the political communication process, which are at the center of this thesis. Perloff states that they are the “three main actors who clamor for space on the public stage: leaders, the media, and the public.” These three elements forge “the golden triangle of political communication.” *Figure 1* depicts the triangle. It shows the influence and dependency of each actor on the others.³³



*Figure 1: Triangle of Political Communication*³⁴

Leaders can communicate directly (e.g., via TV addresses and social media) or through the media (e.g., through background talks to journalists, which will then report what the leader said) with the public. If the leader is successful in his or her communication, the public is more likely to accept his or her policies. The leader, however, also communicates directly with the media by interacting with them and vice versa. The media will then either report neutrally, positively, or critically about the leader’s policies or actions.

The public can either communicate directly with the leader (e.g., by writing personal letters, by protesting or with social media messages) or via the media (e.g., by writing a letter to the editor and raising questions or opinions). Both can make the leader change course on his or her policies.

The media also directly communicates with the people (by their reporting), yet the public also has influence over the media by expressing their interests (e.g., through surveys).

³² Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 8–9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 8–10. These three actors come up with at times different designations and weighing of importance in other scholarly work, e.g., Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, Fifth edition (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011); David L. Helfert, *Political Communication in Action: From Theory to Practice* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc, 2018); Doris A. Graber, “Political Communication: Scope, Progress, Promise,” in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline. Part II*, ed. A. W. Finifter, 305–332 (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association, 1993).

³⁴ Figure created by the author based on Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 8–9 and Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, 6.

Media outlets then might be (economically) motivated to cover these topics.³⁵ These interconnections can be seen in *Figure 1* by the arrows going both ways for all three actors. Next to the public, the media and the leaders, there are also other groups involved in the political communication process. These are, for instance, lobby groups, NGO's or even terrorist groups. However, they are considered irrelevant for this thesis and therefore not covered in detail.³⁶

In the following, the three corner points of the triangle are looked at in more detail and their interconnections are analyzed.

3.1 The Leaders

According to Perloff, there are various types of leaders. For example, they can be distinguished based on the political level they are active on. Clearly, there is a difference between a local leader like a mayor, compared to a state governor or a senator on the national level. They can also be distinguished based on how they reached their position, for example, they can either be elected or appointed.³⁷ McNair defines them as “those individuals who aspire, through organisational and institutional means, to influence the decision-making process.” Yet, he calls them political actors instead of leaders.³⁸ While McNair's political actor and Perloff's leader group clearly include political leaders, McNair's political actor group seems to be even broader, explicitly including terrorist and public organizations.³⁹ However, both scholars count politicians among this group. In this thesis, the leader position is taken by the President of the United States.

3.2 The Media

Many people might argue that they know who or what is meant by the term media. Yet, the media is more far-ranging than often thought and can have several different meanings. Thus, the term needs further clarification and, in the following, a definition that makes this connection is derived.

According to common definitions, the media are “the means of communication, as radio and television, newspapers, magazines, and the internet, that reach or influence people

³⁵ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 8.

³⁶ For a detailed breakdown of groups, the interested reader is referred to Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, Fifth edition (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011).

³⁷ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 8–9.

³⁸ McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7–9.

widely.”⁴⁰ Today, there is an enormous number of such means of communication.⁴¹ However, this definition of media is inadequate in the context of political communication as it is not sufficiently connected to politics. The above definition ignores an important aspect: by producing content, the media becomes more than a means of communication. It is playing an active role in the communication. In the context of political communication, one of the most important contents that the media produces are *news*. It is, however, important to note that most of the content the media produces cannot be considered news. And even “most news is not about politics” but mainly entertainment or non-political information (e.g., coverage of celebrities, sports, etc.).⁴²

So what exactly are the *media* in the context of political communication and in the context of this dissertation? In this dissertation, the term *media* refers to the producers of the content and the produced content that are concerned – broadly – with political news. Hence, what is mostly called the *news media*. In this thesis, the two terms will be used interchangeably.

This definition also stresses the fact that the *media* are actors of the political communication as shown in the model and not only means of communication. In order not to confuse this definition of media with the common one given above, a means of communication is referred to as a medium. In contrast, the term *media* as defined above will consistently be used in plural only.

Another term that is often used in this context is the term *press*. But how does it fit into the above definition? Historically, the *press* referred to the fact that newspapers and magazines, for a long time the main mediums for news, were printed in a press. Originally, the term thus only included print media. Over time, with other media coming into existence, the term *press* has evolved to also include radio, television, and parts of the Internet.⁴³ It is thus seen as an “old-style term” for the *news media*.⁴⁴ Therefore, the terms *press* and *news media* are used interchangeably in addition to *media*.

⁴⁰ “Definition of Media,” *Dictionary.com*, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/media> (accessed October 25, 2021). Similar definitions can be found with several other dictionaries, e.g., Cambridge Dictionary or Merriam-Webster.

⁴¹ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 9.

⁴² Robert E. Denton and Gary C. Woodward, *Political Communication in America*, 3. ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 66.

⁴³ Stephanie A. Martin, “Introduction,” in *Columns to Characters: The Presidency and the Press Enter the Digital Age*, ed. Stephanie A. Martin, xix–xxxv (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2017), xxi–xxii.

⁴⁴ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 14.

After defining the term media in the context of political communication, their role within the golden triangle can be examined in more detail. Politicians in general like to provide citizens with information mainly promoting their own politics. In democracies, there is a need for an outlet that provides the public with (more) objective information. To enable the public to assess on who best represents their interests, “the media are the only feasible way.”⁴⁵

The main function of the media concerning government activity is twofold. They have the role of a watchdog that hold the government accountable and provide information about important issues and activities together with context and critical analysis. The latter especially distinguishes the media from direct communication between the public and the politicians and assigns a high democratic value to them. Studies show that free media reduce corruption and increase the quality of governance. Consequently, the more restricted the media, the lower the quality of governance might be. Suppressed media cannot inform the public properly or monitor the government.⁴⁶ Thus, to be able to fulfill their functions, freedom of the press and independence from government are essential. Ultimately, the importance of the media for democracies is reflected in the protection of the freedom of the press in constitutions of democracies worldwide.

Yet, when one characterizes the media as an actor in the process of political communication, McNair rightly argues “that they [media] have the capacity not merely to observe and report on [...], but also to shape and influence those [political] processes.” He elaborates that at least with some reporting, the media can try to influence the audience or convince them of their standpoint, as with for example editorials. In these instances, the media outlet turns into “an active participant in the political process, and not merely the detached observer.” Through the Internet and social media, more media organizations have become active participants, with most of the outlets being privately owned and deeply ideological.⁴⁷ However, this does not always have to be negative. By “judging and critiquing the variety of political viewpoints in circulation,” the media balance the

⁴⁵ Stephen E. Frantzich, *Presidents and the Media: The Communicator in Chief* (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 2.

⁴⁶ Marisa Kellam and Elizabeth A. Stein, “Silencing Critics: Why and How Presidents Restrict Media Freedom in Democracies,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 49, no. 1 (2016), 36–77: 39. For further information on the studies: Lindita Camaj, “The Media’s Role in Fighting Corruption: Media Effects on Governmental Accountability,” *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 18, no. 1 (2013), 21–42; Elizabeth A. Stein and Marisa Kellam, “Programming Presidential Agendas,” *Political Communication*, 31, no. 1 (2014), 25–52.

⁴⁷ Brian McNair, “The Media as Political Actors,” in *Political Communication*, ed. Carsten Reinemann, 289–303, *Handbooks of Communication Science* 18 (Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton, 2014), 290–91.

politicians' viewpoints and help citizens to get a better overview and understanding of issues.⁴⁸

The relationship between the president and the media is very important for this thesis. To have a professional working relationship that benefits each actor, they must treat the other with respect and acknowledge that they need the other. The leaders need the media as a channel for their stories and the media need the leader as an information source for their reporting.⁴⁹

Now only one corner is missing to close the triangle of political communication.

3.3 The Public

The public is often used synonymously with all citizens of a country, thus, in this case citizens of the United States of America. Yet, this lacks the fact that leaders or the media can also address non-citizens, for instance, when presidents address immigration regulations or a pathway to citizenship for immigrants. In this case, also the immigrant is part of the public that is addressed by the president on the issue of immigration.

Thus, for this dissertation, the public is understood as a more overarching concept. Yet, it is also acknowledged that presidents often address American citizens when they aim to communicate with the public. This shows that 'the public' is a flowing concept, highly dependent on context.

Ideally every individual of the public would be well informed about politics, however, they have different political interests or knowledge and their access to political power varies considerably.⁵⁰ It is important to note that messages addressed to the public can have a broad audience (and even address the whole public) but also a very narrow audience (aiming to address only parts of the public). Examples are campaign TV advertisements versus small campaign fundraisers.⁵¹

⁴⁸ McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, 67.

⁴⁹ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 219–20; McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, 205.

⁵⁰ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 8–9.

⁵¹ McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, 10. McNair's talks in his book in more general terms about the audience of political messages. For this chapter, only the aspect of the public as the audience is relevant. Yet clearly, the other groups of the political communication process can also be the addressee of messages.

III. Environment of Political Communication in the U.S.

After identifying the main actors and their general relation in the model of the golden triangle of communication, the model is embedded in the historical context. This means to analyze the environment and the emerging relationship between the actors in which the political communication happens, in this case in the United States of America. Thus, the following chapter looks at the development of presidential communication in the United States and how this affected the leaders' interaction with the media, the development of the media environment in the United States and the development of the attitudes of public towards the media and politics in the United States.

1. Presidential Environment

The following section discusses the communications operation by the president. Additionally, as the thesis examines presidential media communication, the president's means of interaction with the second actor, the media, is examined in detail.

1.1 White House Communications

Presidential communication is enshrined in American politics.⁵² Because in a democratic political system, where elected leaders represent the citizens, leaders have to constantly vie for support of their policies.⁵³

Over the last century the importance of presidential communication has grown. According to Martha Joynt Kumar, good communications operations are crucial for presidents as "persuasion is so central to presidential accomplishments."⁵⁴ Susan Douglas argues along the same lines stating that media-savvy presidents and staff "had more successful presidencies."⁵⁵ Placing a high value on communication and knowing how to make use of media structures are certainly not a guarantee for a successful presidency, since various factors as historical and political developments play important roles. Yet, their statements show that not understanding their respective current media environment and

⁵² David Ryfe, *Presidents in Culture: The Meaning of Presidential Communication* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2005), 1.

⁵³ Martha Joynt Kumar, *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), xiii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁵⁵ Susan J. Douglas, "Presidents and the Media," in *Recapturing the Oval Office: New Historical Approaches to the American Presidency*, ed. Brian Balogh and Bruce J. Schulman, 143–61 (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2015), 161.

underestimating the importance of communication and media relationships led to major publicity and messaging problems. Thus, a focus on effective communications operations aids presidents in achieving their goals.

It helps that the president's possibilities to communicate are unique compared to other government officials. Firstly, the press is ready to report presidential news at any time and, secondly, the president has a large communications team working on getting his message out.⁵⁶

The organizational structure of the communication apparatus of the White House has changed over the centuries. While in earlier periods, presidents managed their own communications, organizational structures needed to be implemented to deal with the more frequent press interactions.⁵⁷

Between 1880 and 1932, the presidency moved into the national spotlight as it "became the national political news center." Over the half-century, U.S. presidents expanded their travels and raised their national public profiles. Internationally, they assumed the role of a world leader. With that the media's attention to the presidents rose. This necessitated more professional staff to handle the increasingly frequent interactions with the media.⁵⁸

Over the course of Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, two crises (the Great Depression and World War II) made the White House "the center of national news" and required the president to communicate more with the public.⁵⁹ The rise of television required further changes so that the White House was able to manage the communication and publicity of the president. Eisenhower's Press Secretary James Hagerty enlarged his and the Press Office's duties, taking charge of communication strategies and the executive branch's publicity.⁶⁰ Richard Nixon as vice president under Eisenhower was able to witness first-hand the advantages of such coordinated communication. During his presidency he established the Office of Communications.⁶¹ The idea was to have a unit whose task it was to approach various media. With that, "state and local outreach efforts as part of the presidential communication process" were institutionalized.⁶²

Therefore today, two units are responsible for presidential communication at the White House: The Office of Communications and the Press Office. They are headed by the

⁵⁶ Kumar, *Managing the President's Message*, 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiii–xxv.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xxviii.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xxx.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 120.

communications director and the press secretary, respectively. This may seem like a duplication of positions; yet, they have distinct functions.⁶³ As the leader of the Office of Communication, the director of communications has a large field of responsibilities concerned “with the long-term strategy of providing information [...] and coordinating the [...] outreach” to all media. Moreover, the director is tasked with coordinating the message of the different institutions of the executive branch. He or she remains mostly unknown to the public and works “behind the scenes.”⁶⁴

In contrast to the director of communications, the press secretary (heading the Press Office) deals with the daily news media inquiries and interactions. He or she is seen as the president’s voice, portraying the position of the chief executive. Mostly speaking on the record, the press secretary publicly represents the administration.⁶⁵ Today, the press secretary typically has two fixed interactions a day with the White House press corps: in the morning a short and informal meeting in his or her office called “the gaggle” and around noon the longer official, televised press briefing.⁶⁶ Moreover, the secretary responds to inquiries by reporters, for example via telephone or in person at the office.⁶⁷

The press secretary has “three constituents:” The president, staff, and the media. The president wants his positions accurately represented by the secretary. Staff occasionally want to pursue own interests, exert influence, or try to steer clear of the press themselves. And the media wish to be given information from and access to the secretary. But the press secretary faces a dilemma: “Expected to satisfy the needs of three constituents [...] ultimately he [or she] is responsible to only one, the President.”⁶⁸ Thus, conflict between the secretary and the constituents – but in particular the media – is predestined.

A president’s own approach towards communication will also show in his communications team. If the chief executive does not care about communication, neither will his staff. If he is instead dedicated to communication, his staff will be as well.⁶⁹ According to Kumar, there are four functions that a competent communications operation can have: “it advocates for the president and his policies, explains the president’s actions and thinking, defends

⁶³ Frantzich, *Presidents and the Media*, 68; Marlin Fitzwater, *Call the Briefing!: Bush and Reagan, Sam and Helen: A Decade with Presidents and the Press* (New York, NY: Times Books, 1995), 239.

⁶⁴ Frantzich, *Presidents and the Media*, 68–69.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 68–69, 86; Kumar, *Managing the President's Message*, 178.

⁶⁶ Kumar, *Managing the President's Message*, 222–223.

⁶⁷ Frantzich, *Presidents and the Media*, 81.

⁶⁸ Michael Baruch Grossman and Martha Joynt Kumar, *Portraying the President: The White House and the News Media* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 148.

⁶⁹ Kumar, *Managing the President's Message*, 286.

him against his critics, and coordinates presidential publicity.”⁷⁰ Yet, besides having two units charged with supporting his communication efforts, the president still finds it challenging to convey consistent messages in the fractured and polarized media environment of today (see III.2.2).⁷¹

One major influence factor in the president’s communication is the relationship with the second actor: the media.

1.2 The President-Media Relationship

On the relationship of the president and the media the following questions arise: Who manipulates whom? Who holds the more powerful position in the relationship? Is the media too critical or too conformist? Is the president the victim of aggressive media or the manager of the media’s reporting?⁷²

According to Perloff, democratic theory says that the two actors have distinct positions in a democratic system. The former leads the government and is the central figure of American politics. The latter view “themselves as surrogates for the public,” and thus feel the need to provide information on the government and by that monitor its action.⁷³ This highlights an important aspect of presidential-press relations: It is “a dynamic, transactional relationship. Each [side] affects the other.”⁷⁴ As mentioned at the beginning of Chapter II.3, an effective relationship between politicians and the media builds on symbiotic and respectful interactions. This holds true for the president-media relationship. Over the course of the 20th century, chief executives who acknowledged the generally antagonistic setting of the presidency and the media yet at the same time understood how to interact with the media, and did not bear a persistent grudge over criticism by them, had more pleasant relationships.⁷⁵ The media favored presidents who were friendly towards them, facilitated their work and in general “conformed to their stereotypes of what a president should be like.”⁷⁶ This also applies to the 21st century.

Presidents should not neglect that, when they try to address “the public through the news media[,] [...] their first audience is the news media.” Not only has the story to be of interest for the media but presidents who recognize that “the media prefer the simple to the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁷¹ Ibid., xiv.

⁷² Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 16.

⁷³ Ibid; Grossman and Kumar, *Portraying the President*, 4–5.

⁷⁴ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 97.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 55–56; Susan J. Douglas, “Presidents and the Media,” in *Recapturing the Oval Office*, 146.

⁷⁶ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 55–56; Susan J. Douglas, “Presidents and the Media,” in *Recapturing the Oval Office*, 146.

complex, the grounded to the abstract, the present to the past” are able to author their own media coverage.⁷⁷

Still, no chief executive has ever been entirely pleased with his media coverage. Typically, presidents consider themselves and their policies better than how they are portrayed by the media. Consequently, they have felt the need to correct or control critical media coverage since the early days of the Republic. A prevalent sentiment among presidents is that the media is “predisposed to assail their policies, misconstrue their motives, misunderstand their sincerity, and injure their reputations.” On the contrary, media representatives have been convinced “they protect the country from danger” by exposing what the administrations try to keep secret. This tenor is where the efforts by administrations to limit media access and the calls for greater transparency by the media come from.⁷⁸ The sentiments and actions varied in their manifestations, but they consistently run through the history of the president-media relationship.

Since Eisenhower’s presidency, public support of the presidency has declined. This shift in public attitude was reinforced by the changes that occurred in the media environment. The emergence of new technology and media enterprises as well as increasing financial resources allowed journalists to report on the chief executive in ways they had not been before. The coverage became more instantaneous and included presidential activities which previously had not been reported on. This change “magnified the faults in the institution and its occupant.”⁷⁹ Moreover, the attitude of the media towards politicians changed in the late 1960s. Through the Vietnam War and later Watergate, the media became “more skeptical, [and] less deferential” of politicians and their messages and took a more investigative approach in their reporting, creating a more adversarial press for the decades to come.⁸⁰ In addition, coverage is not always without faults. It likely concentrates on conflicts, often focuses on small details and, at times, oversimplifies the highly complex environment that policies are made in.⁸¹ In their book published in 1981, Grossman and Kumar argue that relationship’s antagonistic parts typically stand out the most but

⁷⁷ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 220; Roderick P. Hart and Alexander L. Curry, “The Third Voice of American Politics,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 46, no. 1 (2016), 73–97: 77.

⁷⁸ Harold Holzer, *The President Vs. The Press: The Endless Battle Between the White House and the Media - from the Founding Fathers to Fake News* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2020), xiv.

⁷⁹ Grossman and Kumar, *Portraying the President*, 315.

⁸⁰ Michael Gurevitch, Stephen Coleman and Jay G. Blumler, “Political Communication — Old and New Media Relationships,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 625, no. 1 (2009), 164–81: 165.

⁸¹ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 97.

“cooperation and continuity are at its core.”⁸² However, in Kumar’s book *Managing the President’s Message* (2010) which builds on the book of 1981, she rightly states that although the cooperative core of the relationship prevails, the level of antagonism between the president and the media has risen.⁸³

One dimension of direct presidential interaction with the media are press conferences. What they represent and how they evolved is looked at in the following section.

1.3 Presidential Press Conferences

According to Kumar, Americans see “press conferences as the basic type of presidential interchange with reporters.”⁸⁴ A democracy requires leaders to answer questions from citizens, and presidential press conferences provide a forum for doing so. There, journalists pose these questions to the president and by that “act as surrogates for the public.”⁸⁵ Over time, presidential press conferences have turned into an institutionalized exchange: “Presidents are expected to hold them. Reporters are expected to ask tough questions.”⁸⁶ As press conferences have existed for over a century, elements of this forum of interaction between the president and the media were influenced by the changing environment.⁸⁷ Thus, a consistent classification of what is a presidential press conference can be difficult at times and is disputed among scholars. This is reflected by the fact that different scholars state varying overall numbers of press conferences for each president in their analyses. Whereas some scholars use their own criteria on what classifies as a presidential press conference, this dissertation uses the online data base of the *American Presidency Project*. The project bases its classification on the one made by the *National Archives*. The classifications by the *National Archives* “reflect decisions made on the basis of precedent and rendered by

⁸² Grossman and Kumar, *Portraying the President*, 2.

⁸³ Kumar, *Managing the President’s Message*, xix–xx.

⁸⁴ Martha Joynt Kumar, “The Mediums That Matter: Presidential Press Relationships and How Chief Executives Respond to Shifting Technological Tides,” in *Columns to Characters: The Presidency and the Press Enter the Digital Age*, ed. Stephanie A. Martin, 3–24 (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2017), 5.

⁸⁵ Martha Joynt Kumar, “Presidential Press Conferences: Windows on the Presidency and Its Occupants,” *The White House Historical Association*, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/presidential-press-conferences> (accessed March 31, 2020).

⁸⁶ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 70.

⁸⁷ Martha Joynt Kumar, “Source Material: ‘Does This Constitute a Press Conference?’: Defining and Tabulating Modern Presidential Press Conferences,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 33, no. 1 (2003), 221–37: 222. Changes can be, for instance, to the location the press conferences is held in, the frequency with which a president holds them, who is allowed to attend, etc.

people who carry a White House institutional memory.”⁸⁸ Therefore, these classifications are made based on knowledge of and experience with the presidency.

The aim of a presidential press conferences is to inform the public and gain support for the president’s actions and policies.⁸⁹ It represents the basic platform for interactions between the president and the press and used to be the only regular forum where a president answered questions by the press that was documented by a written record. Nowadays, there are other forums as well.⁹⁰

That – so far – all successors of President Wilson committed themselves to press conferences “is testimony to the press's [sic!] continuing interest in the presidency no matter who serves as president or what he says or does” and at the same time is evidence of “the public's perception of the importance of the office and the presidents' interest in keeping in touch.”⁹¹

Although the White House Press Corps can ask the president questions, a lot of power lies with the president as he decides when to hold a press conference, for how long, who he calls on and how to answer questions.⁹² But those sessions still put “presidents in a vulnerable state” as they give insight into the presidents’ political views and show how a president behaves “on his own, with his staff reduced to an audience role.”⁹³ As the president’s time is “the most valuable resource a White House has,” the importance of the press conferences is reflected in the extensive preparation of the president and White House staff for them.⁹⁴

Today’s presidential press conferences are very structured events consisting of two main parts: they mostly start with the opening statement delivered by the president on issues he likes to stress or discuss. This is followed by a question-and-answer section where reporters can ask the president questions on any topic they want the president to comment on.⁹⁵

The audience of press conferences is manifold. The obvious and most direct audience are the journalists in the room who will report on the words of the president. However, a press

⁸⁸ Ibid., 223. Since in most cases there is no comparison with the speech manuscript, in exceptional cases not everything said is shown in the transcripts.

⁸⁹ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 71.

⁹⁰ Martha Joynt Kumar, “Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 35, no. 1 (2005), 166–92: 173.

⁹¹ Ibid., 168.

⁹² Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 71.

⁹³ Kumar, “Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum”: 167.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 192.

⁹⁵ Eshbaugh-Soha, “Presidential Influence of the News Media: The Case of the Press Conference”: 554.

conference is also intended to directly reach citizens, can give signals to officials in government and – at times – directly addresses an international audience.⁹⁶

However, press conferences are not always fruitful events for each side. When presidents only give prepared answers, evade questions, or only talk about their preferred topics or reporters mainly care about their television image and ask “gotcha”-questions instead of substantive ones, presidential press conferences turn into “television events” and lack the useful exchange of the president and the media. Overall, the exchange can lack appropriate politeness on both sides.⁹⁷ Presidents also intentionally decrease access of the White House press corps to them and their staff by, for instance, reducing the frequency of press conferences. Such actions hinder the White House press corps in fulfilling its role on keeping an eye on the executive government and in particular the president’s work.⁹⁸ However, even if the relationship between the president and the press is full of tensions, the White House press corps journalists argue that following and seeing the president regularly makes it harder for the administration to keep secrets.⁹⁹

Presidential press conferences can be divided into four periods of development.¹⁰⁰ The following section illustrates the distinct characteristics and highlights the presidents or media environment developments that notably shaped the presidential press conferences in each period.

The Period of 1913-1933

The press conferences of this period were mostly held in the Oval Office and were characterized by being off-the record sessions, meaning that presidents had to agree to be quoted publicly and could change quotes before publication.¹⁰¹ Whereas Woodrow Wilson’s predecessors had met with selected reporters in “small-talk sessions,” he initiated “equal-access sessions” which all journalists were allowed to attend.¹⁰² This was the birth of the presidential press conferences and all succeeding presidents followed Wilson’s

⁹⁶ Frantzich, *Presidents and the Media*, 115.

⁹⁷ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 71–72.

⁹⁸ Frantzich, *Presidents and the Media*, 67.

⁹⁹ Susan Milligan, “The Presidency and the Press: There Is a Widening Gap Between the White House Press Corps and the President It Is Charged with Covering, and Both Sides Share the Blame,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 53, no. 6 (2015), 22–7: 27.

¹⁰⁰ The original source ends the fourth period in 2004 due to its publishing date in that year. However, in the opinion of the author, the press conferences have shown the same characteristics since 2004. The fourth period is thus extended till today.

¹⁰¹ Kumar, “Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum”: 177-178, 186.

¹⁰² Martha Joynt Kumar, “W.H. Press Conferences Turn 100,” *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/03/wh-press-conferences-turn-100-089402> (accessed April 1, 2020).

example.¹⁰³ By getting his view to the public through the reporters Wilson hoped to gain public support for his legislative agenda as well as to get information on the region the reporters came from. However, the press conferences did not turn out as he imagined, and by mid-1915, he had already lost interest in them.¹⁰⁴

At the end of this period, the press had also developed a negative attitude towards the conferences. Henry Suydam, a former White House correspondent for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, described the press conferences in 1931 as “a futile and time-consuming device, both to the President and the Press.” He furthermore stated that the benefit was “90 per cent on the side of the President.” Suydam openly argued for “the complete abolition of this system.”¹⁰⁵ Such adverse attitude towards the press conferences came from the “negativism of Calvin Coolidge and the intransigence of Herbert Hoover.”¹⁰⁶ The press saw the press conferences as time consuming and unhelpful events, but this abruptly changed with Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The Period of 1933-1953

The 32nd president turned out to be the perfect fit to restore the significance of the conferences. His wit, captivating demeanor and understanding of the journalistic world guaranteed him a better relationship with the White House press corps. Moreover, Roosevelt understood how to market himself and his agenda. He managed to make the press conferences a major attraction for the press corps and in combination with his 12 years in office he dominated this period.¹⁰⁷

Roosevelt typically invited reporters to the Oval Office. There was little space for all the correspondents and often reporters and the president had difficulties hearing each other.¹⁰⁸

The first press conference was attended by 125 reporters and Roosevelt took the time to

¹⁰³ Martha Joynt Kumar, “Presidential Press Conferences.”

¹⁰⁴ Martha Joynt Kumar, “W.H. Press Conferences turn 100.”

¹⁰⁵ Henry Suydam, “Friday Afternoon Session April 24, 1931,” in *Conference on the Press: Held at Princeton University, April 23-25, 1931, Under the Auspices of the School of Public and International Affairs, with the Financial Assistance of Mr. Chester D. Pugsley*, ed. C. D. Pugsley and D. C. Poole, 61–93 (Washington, D.C.: The Printing Corporation of America, 1931), 67.

¹⁰⁶ Leo C. Rosten, “President Roosevelt and the Washington Correspondents,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1, no. 1 (1937), 36–52: 37.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Kumar, “Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum”: 182.

greet each of them personally. Afterwards he “bantered with them for the next 40 minutes.” This original event was the blueprint for most of his subsequent press conferences.¹⁰⁹ While Roosevelt’s press conferences were still off the record, he introduced rules concerning the publication of the information acquired and the form of the allowed questions.¹¹⁰ First, he would not answer certain questions. Among them were “if” questions or questions he did not “know enough about to answer.” Second, no direct quotations were allowed, except for the written down direct quotations handed out by Press Secretary Steve Early. Third, the “background information” that reporters could use was not allowed to “be attributed to the White House.” Finally, if the given information was declared confidential, the White House reporters were not allowed to pass on the information.¹¹¹ However, Roosevelt abolished the rule that questions had to be submitted prior to the conferences. This was a major change for the White House press corps as journalists were now allowed to ask the president questions about almost anything they were interested in.¹¹² Consequently, the press conferences’ dynamic changed. Roosevelt started to use the press conferences as a place to discuss his agenda and turned them into the most important news source.¹¹³

Although Roosevelt had introduced certain rules, the press corps was delighted with the new president and his approach towards the conferences. After the first press conference, they spontaneously applauded, which was an unprecedented reaction.¹¹⁴ According to Richard Strout, a reporter who covered the White House, the correspondents “might not have agreed with his politics, but [they] had a symbiotic relationship.” Roosevelt had gotten the press corps’ sympathy through his personality rather than his politics.¹¹⁵ Through Roosevelt, the press conferences became important and valued events and the abolition of the pre-submission of questions is still effective today.

¹⁰⁹ Jean E. Smith, “Obama, F.D.R. And Taming the Press,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2009, <https://100days.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/02/obama-fdr-and-taming-the-press/?searchResultPosition=1> (accessed April 15, 2020).

¹¹⁰ Press conferences stayed off-the-record sessions until President Eisenhower.

¹¹¹ “Press Conference | March 08, 1933,” *The American Presidency Project*, March 8, 1933, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/press-conference-25> (accessed June 3, 2022).

¹¹² Jean E. Smith, “Obama, F.D.R. and Taming the Press.”

¹¹³ Kumar, “Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum”: 181; Stephen Ansolabehere, Roy L. Behr and Shanto Iyengar, *The Media Game: American Politics in the Television Age* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1993), 112.

¹¹⁴ Rosten, “President Roosevelt and the Washington Correspondents”: 39.

¹¹⁵ Richard L. Strout, “The President and the Press,” in *The Making of the New Deal: The Insiders Speak*, ed. Katie Louchheim, 12–9 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 13.

The Period of 1953-1981

Since the Eisenhower presidency, press conferences have been on the record events. A major change came on January 19, 1955, when Eisenhower held the first televised press conference. An edited version of the conference was broadcast, and a complete transcript printed in the newspapers.¹¹⁶

Eisenhower's successor, John F. Kennedy, took this step to the next level as he was the first president to do *live* televised news conferences.¹¹⁷ The decision to broadcast the news conference on live television had a lasting effect as it is still common practice today. According to Kumar, the relevance of press conferences increased through television but at the same time they became high risk events for presidents.¹¹⁸ To reduce the possibility for blunders, not only more preparation was needed but also changes to the setting were introduced. For instance, seating charts were prepared for the president, so he would be able to identify reporters he wanted to call on.¹¹⁹

But still the number of press conferences held by presidents decreased greatly. Over time communications departments developed to improve the interactions of the president with the media and especially safer forms of interactions with the media, as interviews, started to gain importance.¹²⁰

Televising the press conferences had a major impact on the presidents' publicity. In particular during times with few television channels, the press conferences had large television audiences and offered presidents a direct way to publicly justify their policies or even themselves.¹²¹

As their popularity grew over time, press conferences had to be relocated several times in need for more space for the Press Corps. From the Oval Office (Wilson to Truman), to the Indian Treaty Room (Truman and Eisenhower), to the State Department Auditorium during the Kennedy administration.¹²² Various other locations were used over the following decades. Today, typical locations would be for example the East Room or the Rose Garden of the White House.

¹¹⁶ Martha Joynt Kumar, "W.H. Press Conferences turn 100."

¹¹⁷ Press conferences were officially called news conferences during Kennedy's presidency.

¹¹⁸ Kumar, "Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum": 183; Martha Joynt Kumar, "Presidential Press Conferences."

¹¹⁹ Kumar, "Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum": 172, 183.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹²¹ Martha Joynt Kumar, "Presidential Press Conferences"; Melissa de Witte, "Stanford Scholar Draws Historical Parallels Between the Press and Presidencies," *Stanford News*, November 13, 2018, <https://news.stanford.edu/2018/11/13/historical-parallels-press-president/> (accessed April 6, 2020).

¹²² Martha Joynt Kumar, "Presidential Press Conferences."

Period of 1981-Today

Since 1981, the White House press corps had started to ask provocative or even hostile questions more frequently. Therefore, the presidents wanted to minimize the risk of committing a blunder and searched for safer forms of media interaction. One way was to increase the number of joint sessions. These are press conferences held by the president together with other officials, mainly foreign leaders. As each of the participants gives a statement and answers a restricted amount of questions, the individual time of exposure towards the press corps is reduced. These sessions are typically also shorter in time with only about 20 minutes instead of around 45 minutes for solo press conferences.¹²³ Other frequently used options include interviews with selected network shows or short question-and-answer sessions (brief exchanges between a limited number of press corps reporters and the president).¹²⁴ Moreover, as more channels became available with the rise of cable, the significance of press conferences sank as audiences decreased and networks did not want to give up primetime timeslots to presidents.¹²⁵

Consequently, press conferences have been used less frequently by presidents. Recent presidents have been able to focus on their preferred form of media interaction, given they made themselves available to the reporters in press conferences from time to time.¹²⁶

Overall, press conferences evolved over time. Some presidents increased their importance by their adaptations and turned them into much anticipated events. In particular since the 1980s presidents followed a trend of holding fewer press conferences and succeeded in trying to find less risky ways to interact with the news media.

2. Media Environment

The development of the media environment is an important aspect that has to be considered when comparing the media communication of president from different decades since the existing media varied greatly over the course of the history of the United States of America.

2.1 The Development of the Media Environment

Since the founding of the Republic, the media environment did not develop steadily, it was characterized by periods of continuity and by periods of change. There were systemic

¹²³ Kumar, "Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum": 172, 189–190.

¹²⁴ Martha Joynt Kumar, "W.H. Press Conferences turn 100."

¹²⁵ Melissa de Witte, "Stanford Scholar Draws Historical Parallels Between the Press and Presidencies."

¹²⁶ Martha Joynt Kumar, "W.H. Press Conferences turn 100."

changes as the consolidation of media organizations or the emergence of new occupations (pollsters, advertising professionals, etc.) but also technological developments that led to drastic shifts in the media environment.¹²⁷

News coverage about presidents and their politics has caused tensions between the media and the White House. Presidential communication strategies have been essential in increasing the presidents' influence. But every media environment posed distinct challenges for presidents and their communication.¹²⁸

The Newspaper as the Principal News Source

Newspapers were the dominant information source on American politics over the first two centuries of U.S. history.¹²⁹ In the early days of the Republic, their reporting was characterized by partisan and tabloid-style penny press journalism.¹³⁰ At the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century, objective reporting by journalists started to become the new industry standard. According to David Shribman,

in that conception, journalism's role was to inform – to redeem the responsibilities and privileges of the First Amendment by providing the public with the information it needed to make sober, reasonable, even enlightened, selections. [...] Politicians governed, judges decided, and journalists informed. It was an iron triangle of noble roles and responsibilities.¹³¹

The Rise of Radio

When radio broadcasting emerged in the U.S. in 1920, newspapers were confronted with a new information-providing competitor. Within the next years, broadcasting stations expanded in the country and the first radio network, the *National Broadcasting Company* (NBC), was founded in 1926. However, radio did not reach considerable influence before the mid-1930s.¹³² As of 1938, over 91 percent of households in urban areas and about 70 percent of households in rural areas had at least one radio.¹³³ In contrast to newspapers,

¹²⁷ Susan J. Douglas, "Presidents and the Media," in *Recapturing the Oval Office*, 145.

¹²⁸ Stephen J. Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication and Character: White House News Management from Clinton and Cable to Twitter and Trump* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 13.

¹²⁹ Frantzich, *Presidents and the Media*, 10.

¹³⁰ Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication and Character*, 13.

¹³¹ David M. Shribman, "The Role of the Mainstream Media in the Age of Trump," in *Trumping Ethical Norms: Teachers, Preachers, Pollsters, and the Media Respond to Donald Trump*, ed. Louis S. Maisel and Hannah E. Dineen, 26–32 (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 29–30.

¹³² Robert J. Brown, *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), 1–2.

¹³³ Christopher H. Sterling and John M. Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting*, 3rd ed. (Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 182.

radio was the first medium with an extensive reach that at the same time provided the possibility of a personal atmosphere. Listening to the broadcasts stimulated the audience's imagination more than the reading of newspapers. Moreover, the immediacy with which news could be communicated to the listener was unprecedented.¹³⁴ It furthermore included groups that prior were excluded from the information cycle of newspapers. For instance, illiterate Americans were able to get information through the radio. Although the illiteracy rate among Whites was fairly low, African Americans still had an illiteracy rate of about 16.4 percent in 1930.¹³⁵ Through its reach of a diverse audience, radio changed the interaction between the government and the American public as it decreased "ethnic and geographic boundaries" that existed between the government and its voters.¹³⁶

Moreover, by the mid-1930s, radio had become an essential part of American family life. The radio was "a highly valued and permanent piece of living room furniture" which in many cases was handmade "with the best woods and intricately decorated." Families would gather around their radio and experience broadcasts as a family event.¹³⁷

Radio was so successful that the total annual gross revenues of the two broadcasting networks *NBC* and *CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System)* quintupled from \$19 million in 1929 to almost \$100 million in 1940. This increase is even more impressive as it happened during the time of the Great Depression.¹³⁸

Television and Politics

After the Second World War, television entered the lives of many Americans. It would quickly turn into the most influential medium in the United States. Only eleven percent of American households owned a television set in 1950. By 1960, the percentage had already risen to 88 percent.¹³⁹ In a study, the Roper Organization found that in 1959 newspapers

¹³⁴ Christopher H. Sterling and Randy Skretvedt, "Radio," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/radio> (accessed November 3, 2020).

¹³⁵ *Understanding Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2016), 303; Thomas D. Snyder and National Center for Education Statistics, eds., *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993), 21.

¹³⁶ John A. Hendricks and Robert E. Denton, "Political Campaigns and Communicating with the Electorate in the Twenty-First Century," in *Communicator-in-Chief: How Barack Obama Used New Media Technology to Win the White House*, ed. John A. Hendricks and Robert E. Denton, 1–18 (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2010), 2.

¹³⁷ Brown, *Manipulating the Ether*, xi, 2-3.

¹³⁸ David Holbrook Culbert, *News for Everyman: Radio and Foreign Affairs in Thirties America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 15.

¹³⁹ Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York, NY: Atheneum Publishers, 1962), 279; The Roper Organization, *Americas Watching: Public Attitudes Toward Television* (New York, NY: Television Information Office, 1987), 4–5.

still had been the principal news source of Americans: 57 percent of Americans indicated that newspapers were among their main news sources compared to television, which 51 percent of the respondents specified as one of their major news sources. Radio was considered an important source for news by 34 percent.¹⁴⁰ Within four years, by 1963, television had already surpassed newspapers with 55 percent of the respondents indicating television as their main news source in comparison to 53 percent for newspapers. The importance of television increased even further over the next decades. 1986 was the first year that a majority of respondents indicated that television was their only main news source. In contrast to television, the importance of newspapers and radio continued to decline. In fact, radio, the medium that once was of utmost importance, saw the most drastic decline over the years.¹⁴¹

With that profound change of the media environment, new communication opportunities for politicians opened up. Television offered the president a new way to reach citizens and circumvent newspapers.¹⁴² For presidents, the new technology turned into a tool of persuasion with which they could directly appeal to citizens and urge them to take action.¹⁴³

Kennedy was the first president to masterfully use this medium to bypass the media in various settings (see IV.3). One of his successors is also remembered as very telegenic. To reach the public, Ronald Reagan made extensive use of television, which was already a very established medium by the time of his presidency.¹⁴⁴ As a former actor, he knew how to present himself on television.¹⁴⁵ But his reputation as “the Great Communicator” was often more an image than reality. His appearances were planned down to the smallest detail. There were markings on the floor to show the president where he had to stand and even his expression was planned beforehand. Neil A. Hamilton and Ian C. Friedman stated: “Without a script, Reagan was prone to gaffes and unable to recall specifics. With it, he

¹⁴⁰ The total exceeds 100 percent as multiple answers to the question on where the respondents get most of their news from were permitted.

¹⁴¹ Burns W. Roper, “Trends in Attitudes Toward Television and Other Media: A Sixteen-Year Review,” in *Trends in Public Attitudes Toward Television and Other Mass Media 1959-1974*, ed. The Roper Organization, 1–6 (New York, NY: Television Information Office, 1975), 1,3; The Roper Organization, *Americas Watching*, 4.

¹⁴² Ben H. Bagdikian, “Television - the President's Medium?,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 1, no. 2 (1962), 34–8: 36.

¹⁴³ Matthew A. Baum and Samuel Kernell, “Has Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television?,” *The American Political Science Review*, 93, no. 1 (1999), 99–114: 110.

¹⁴⁴ Kumar, *Managing the President's Message*, xxx.

¹⁴⁵ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 61.

communicated forcefully, presenting his vision with so much fervor that he was able to rally wide support for his conservative agenda and reshape politics.”¹⁴⁶

This shows that the visual aspect of television should not be underestimated. Body language and mimics became important aspects presidents had to pay attention to. Giovanni Maddalena argues that television “was the leader’s era” where the politician’s personality came to the fore rather than the leader’s ideas.¹⁴⁷ Whether personality triumphed ideas is debatable. It is undeniable though, that personality became much more important. Television emphasizes nonverbal means of human communication (mimics, gestures, body language) which reveal (often unwittingly) a lot about a person’s personality but can also be used intentionally.

The Influence of Cable Television

By the end of the 1940s, cable television had entered the commercial market. In contrast to traditional broadcast technology – where signals are only transmitted through the air directly to homes – cable signals are transmitted through the air to community antennas and then to homes by wire. This provides for a stronger signal and thus better reception quality.¹⁴⁸ When at the beginning of the 1960s the channel variety of cable providers increased, cable became a potential threat to broadcasters. Because of this new competition local broadcasters wanted the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to step in and put restrictions on cable operators. The FCC, preferring broadcasters, administered such restrictions, for example on the import of distant signals, and with that halted cable development. Restrictions stayed in place until the end of the 1970s when several court rulings and finally the Cable Act of 1984 eliminated all restrictions and the rise of cable began.¹⁴⁹ This deregulation drastically increased the number of people receiving cable, whereas broadcasting networks saw their audiences decline dramatically.¹⁵⁰

With the rise of cable television, presidential communication changed. During the 1970s, there were three networks (*ABC*, *NBC*, *CBS*) that were privately owned and which “accounted for 93 percent of all television viewing.”¹⁵¹ With many new cable channels that

¹⁴⁶ Neil A. Hamilton and Ian C. Friedman, *Presidents: A Biographical Dictionary*, 3. ed. (New York, NY: Facts On File, 2010), 345, 353.

¹⁴⁷ Giovanni Maddalena, “Political Communication in the (Iconic) Trump Epoch,” *European View*, 15, no. 2 (2016), 245–52: 246–7.

¹⁴⁸ Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar, *The Media Game*, 26.

¹⁴⁹ Adam M. Zaretsky, “The Cable TV Industry and Regulation,” *Regional Economist*, July (1995), 5–9: 5, <http://research.stlouisfed.org/publications/regional/95/07/CableTV.pdf>.

¹⁵⁰ Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar, *The Media Game*, 27.

¹⁵¹ *Understanding Media and Culture*, 13. *ABC* stands for *American Broadcasting Company*.

often provided no news content, viewers had more choices and presidents had to compete for viewers' attention. The spread of Video Cassette Recording (VCR) further decreased the president's instant reach as it provided viewers with the freedom to watch not only presidential news as they desired.

Moreover, the news industry was strongly influenced by the launch of 24-hour cable news channels like *CNN* (1980), *MSNBC* and *Fox News* (both 1996).¹⁵² The Clinton administration was the first to feel the effects of this new media environment as it faced novel time pressures by an emerging 24-7 news cycle. The media was on a continuous hunt for news to report and expected immediate answers from the White House to various political developments.¹⁵³ This newly found scrutiny had consequences. The extensive coverage of Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky shows how much the media had changed since Kennedy's time in office. Gone were the days when journalists actively kept presidential sexual affairs out of their reporting. On the contrary, the media jumped on the story. And this change in reporting has remained.¹⁵⁴

The Emergence of the Internet and Social Media

The Internet has had a far-reaching impact on society that few other technological inventions had. With enormous speed it changed how people communicate, acquire information and even live their lives. The number of people who get news online has risen continuously.¹⁵⁵

The Internet was invented in 1989 by Tim Berners-Lee at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN). In 1991, it was made available to the public, became a public domain in 1993, and has continuously evolved ever since.¹⁵⁶

The new medium was quickly adopted by some politicians. On January 20, 1993, the Clinton administration created the first White House online presence on the predecessor of

¹⁵² Frantzich, *Presidents and the Media*, 11–12. *CNN* stands for *Cable Network News* and *MSNBC* is short for *Microsoft National Broadcasting Company*.

¹⁵³ Susan J. Douglas, "Presidents and the Media," in *Recapturing the Oval Office*, 158.

¹⁵⁴ Holzer, *The President vs. the Press*, 331–33. President Clinton's affair was not only covered extensively by the media, but his initial denial and cover-up attempts led to his impeachment.

¹⁵⁵ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 187–88.

¹⁵⁶ "World Wide Web Timeline," *Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.*, March 11, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/03/11/world-wide-web-timeline/> (accessed November 23, 2020). Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The opinions expressed herein, including any implications for policy, are those of the author and not of Pew Research Center.

the World Wide Web (Gopher). The first actual White House website on the World Wide Web was established on October 21, 1994.¹⁵⁷

For politicians this means that voters receive news now not only through “traditional” (or offline) news media. Already in the initial, less-interactive days of the Internet, politicians could target and interact more directly with specific audiences.¹⁵⁸ As the Internet – social media in particular – evolved, opportunities to share opinions and discuss politics with others virtually increased. Today, people can not only decide where and when to get information but also how much information they want on particular issues.¹⁵⁹

In 2004, Governor Howard Dean of Vermont was the first to make extensive use of the Internet’s interactivity. His presidential campaign reached and recruited volunteers through the platform *Meetup.com*. Dean also used new technology for donations by average voters which made him less dependable on major donors.¹⁶⁰ However, it was Barack Obama who set new standards on how to use the Internet and social media during presidential campaigns and as president (see VI.3 and VI.4.2).

Through the Internet, but in particular social media, the speed of communication and information transmission had increased.¹⁶¹ This advancement of the media environment greatly influenced politics. Through the rapid distribution of information, presidents have found themselves in constant “cycles of crisis, reaction and counterreaction.” Thus, the change led to “an extraordinary acceleration in the presidency itself” by everyone expecting immediate reactions from the president. Furthermore, criticism became more frequent as the new communication mediums provided critics with powerful and easy to access platforms. Today, almost anyone can criticize the president with “the flick of a button from the comfort of their living room” and reach millions.¹⁶² This made viral spreading of information possible.¹⁶³ Thus, the more passive television audiences of the 1960s turned into “active participants in public communication.” Through their use of new

¹⁵⁷ Diana Owen and Richard Davis, “Presidential Communication in the Internet Era,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 38, no. 4 (2008), 658–73: 663.

¹⁵⁸ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 188–89.

¹⁵⁹ Aaron Smith, “The Internet’s Role in Campaign 2008,” *Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.*, April 15, 2009, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2009/04/15/the-internets-role-in-campaign-2008/> (accessed May 15, 2020).

¹⁶⁰ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 189–90.

¹⁶¹ John A. Hendricks and Robert E. Denton, “Political Campaigns and Communicating with the Electorate in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Communicator-in-Chief*, 3.

¹⁶² Peter Baker, “Foreword,” in *Columns to Characters: The Presidency and the Press Enter the Digital Age*, ed. Stephanie A. Martin, vii–xii (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2017), vii–xii.

¹⁶³ Eleanor Hall, “Politics in the YouTube Age: Transforming the Political and Media Culture?,” *Reuters Institute*, 2009, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/politics-youtube-age-transforming-political-and-media-culture> (accessed October 29, 2020), 8.

media platforms, they have been “able to intervene in political stories with a [high] degree of effectiveness.” For political communication this means that “the production of political messages and images is much more vulnerable to disruption at the point of reception” as interactive audiences might challenge, change or spread politicians’ messages. The time of “polished, finished performances for public consumption” – as in the times of the non-interactive medium television – is over.¹⁶⁴

Moreover, the diversification of the media environment added to the audience’s power. The number of news sources available to the public has grown significantly and did so further over the last decade. Today, Americans can easily choose the media outlet they prefer at the time they please.¹⁶⁵

In addition, through increasing channel numbers, channels with no or hardly any news content developed (e.g., sports channels). When only few channels – of which all frequently air news programs – exist, the likelihood that people will be confronted with political news is higher than when many channels without news content exist. Thus, there are not only people who are captured in their own political bubble but there are more people who are hardly informed on politics at all. Americans missing the “socially cross-cutting exchanges of experience, knowledge, and comment” formerly provided by – to a large degree – inevitable television news coverage, has negative effects on democracy.¹⁶⁶

Even though the Internet and social media have transformed the media environment and political communication, the “traditional” news media have not become irrelevant. Millions of Americans still watch news on television, read newspapers, and listen to the radio. Therefore, they are still an effective and important instrument in reaching a large audience. For politicians, it is therefore important to use all means of communication to reach citizens.¹⁶⁷

Over time, there were a lot of new communication channels presidents had to add to their list. Each of these changes meant that the media environment presidents had to navigate grew more complex and required them to adapt the presidency by for example adjusting organizational structures, scope of staff or their communication strategy.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler, “Political Communication — Old and New Media Relationships”: 167-168, 171.

¹⁶⁵ George C. Edwards, “Organizing for (in)Action: The Obama Presidency and the Vanishing Hope of an Online Vanguard,” in *Columns to Characters: The Presidency and the Press Enter the Digital Age*, ed. Stephanie A. Martin, 177–205 (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2017), 178.

¹⁶⁶ Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler, “Political Communication — Old and New Media Relationships”: 169–70.

¹⁶⁷ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 206–7.

¹⁶⁸ Susan J. Douglas, “Presidents and the Media,” in *Recapturing the Oval Office*, 144.

2.2 Partisan News and Polarization

Partisan news coverage is strongly influenced by the partisan divide existing in American politics. According to David Helfert, today's partisan divide can be traced back to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. With their passage, the Democratic Party "lost" the white southern vote.¹⁶⁹ The conservative wing of the Republican Party slowly won over these voters. Barry Goldwater in 1964 and Richard Nixon in 1968 successfully targeted these voters during their presidential campaigns. But the leader of the conservative movement who remained influential far beyond his presidency was President Ronald Reagan.¹⁷⁰

When in 1987, the Reagan Administration eliminated the Fairness Doctrine, it paved the way for one-sided and partisan news coverage.¹⁷¹ The Fairness Doctrine had been established by a report of the FCC in 1949. It required broadcasting

licensees [to] devote a reasonable percentage of their broadcasting time to the discussion of public issues of interest in the community served by their stations and that such programs be designed so that the public has a reasonable opportunity to hear different opposing positions on the public issues of interest and importance in the community.¹⁷²

Thus, they had to report about controversial public issues fairly.¹⁷³ Ronald Reagan, besides eliminating the Fairness Doctrine, further enforced the partisan divide. He frequently spoke ill of the federal government and pressed issues such as tax-cuts and minimizing social programs.¹⁷⁴ Nevertheless, until 1995 the communication and working relationship between the parties stayed largely cooperative.¹⁷⁵

This changed with the Republican Revolution or Gingrich Revolution – named after Representative Newt Gingrich. During the 1994 election, Republican candidates pledged to the "Contract With America" – a 10 points campaign promises doctrine drafted by Gingrich. The contract managed to unify the Republican candidates' message and gave voters a chance "to vote *for*" something, not only against Democrats or Democratic politics. Republicans won both houses of Congress.¹⁷⁶

¹⁶⁹ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 28.

¹⁷⁰ "The Conservative Progression: Goldwater to Bush," *PBS*, <https://www.pbs.org/opb/thesixties/topics/politics/legacy.html> (accessed March 23, 2021); James Boyd, "Nixon's Southern Strategy 'It's All in the Charts'," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 17, 1970.

¹⁷¹ Susan J. Douglas, "Presidents and the Media," in *Recapturing the Oval Office*, 157.

¹⁷² "Editorializing by Broadcast Licensees: Docket 8516, 13 FCC 1246. Appendix," *Federal Communications Commission* (08.06.1949), 1257–58.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 28.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁷⁶ "The Conservative Progression: Goldwater to Bush"; David Winston, "The Power of a Positive Message," *The Ripon Forum*, 48, no. 9 (2014), 8–9: 8. The contract can be found under

According to Helfert this

‘revolution’ changed the working relationship between the two political parties and, over time, the culture of Congress. Gone was the tradition that ‘we can disagree on policy all day but go to dinner together in the evening.’ [...] the legislative process became about winning, and winning itself was redefined from making decisions and accomplishing policy goals that benefit the country to accomplishing a party’s political agenda or, alternatively, blocking the other party from accomplishing theirs.¹⁷⁷

This approach then also spread to the Senate and set forth one of the most consequential social revolutions of the last 50 years. It influenced Americans’ perception of politics and politicians, the news media and most fundamentally how Americans approach fellow citizens with different views.¹⁷⁸ On top of that, citizens also tend to look more and more for news media that share their political bent. In a *Pew Research* survey of 2020, about twenty percent on each political side only consume news from outlets whose audience politically aligns with their own views. Consequently, they live “in a more isolated kind of media bubble.”¹⁷⁹

Overall, it resembles a vicious cycle: Partisan politics and partisan news coverage changed people’s attitudes and now those partisan attitudes help drive partisan politics and partisan media coverage. Today, a president can be caught lying to the public but does not need “to admit to [...] followers (or to anyone, for that matter)” to have done so. In a polarized news media environment, critical media coverage will be dismissed as “fake news” and “pro-presidential media” will align with the president’s views.¹⁸⁰

2.3 The Accusation of Media Bias

Accusing the media of biased reporting has a long tradition in the United States. Sometimes these allegations were justified, sometimes they were not.¹⁸¹ As the press of the 19th and early 20th centuries mainly displayed their publisher’s view, partisan bias was clearly

<https://web.archive.org/web/19990427174200/http://www.house.gov/house/Contract/CONTRACT.html> (accessed April 21, 2021).

¹⁷⁷ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 31.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 31, 239–240.

¹⁷⁹ Mark Jurkowitz and Amy Mitchell, “About One-Fifth of Democrats and Republicans Get Political News in a Kind of Media Bubble,” *Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.journalism.org/2020/03/04/about-one-fifth-of-democrats-and-republicans-get-political-news-in-a-kind-of-media-bubble/> (accessed November 24, 2020). In the study, the Democratic political side consists of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, the Republican side of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents.

¹⁸⁰ Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication and Character*, 170.

¹⁸¹ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 235–36.

evident. Large cities often had newspapers openly supporting certain political parties which – at times – would anger politicians.¹⁸²

As the turn towards professionalizing journalism began in the 20th century, journalists and reporters were supposed to be more objective. This is the time when the distinction between editorials and news was implemented. In spite of these developments, bias claims continued. For instance, television networks were attacked for bias against White Southerners in the 1960s and later of opposing the Vietnam War. With the Republican Revolution and the rise of cable television, the liberal bias claim turned into something like a Republican religion. These constant bias claims had their effects. The media responded by softening their coverage of events or not covering specific aspects at all. Journalists included opposing stances for a more ‘balanced’ picture, even if those views were not grounded in facts.¹⁸³

Concerning the existence of the liberal bias accusation, different opinions exist. Scholars, for instance, disagree on the general attitude of the media towards the Vietnam War and the Nixon Administration. Robert Parry argued that the liberal bias claim during the time of and by the Nixon administration was dubious. Parry stated that “the conservative accusation of ‘liberal’ bias had rested on the thesis that an unpatriotic news media [reporting] had ‘lost’ the war in Vietnam.” However, this claim was later disproven.¹⁸⁴ Oscar Winberg took a different view. He argued that the media had a “general liberal tilt” and Nixon, a Republican, “faced a distinctly uphill battle.”¹⁸⁵

As for today, in the extremely diverse media environment, it is most important “where Americans get their news” from and the affiliations of these news outlets. The conservative leaning *Sinclair Broadcast Group* is “already the biggest player in local broadcasting” in the U.S. and has a household coverage of up to 70 percent. Adding *Fox News*’ influence on cable, the nationwide conservative media seems to exceed liberal media. Though, when looking at the individuals in newsrooms, there are more people who identify as Democrats than Republicans, however, Independents are represented the most.¹⁸⁶ These examples

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 235-236, 247.

¹⁸⁴ Robert Parry, “The Rise of the Right-Wing Media Machine,” *FAIR*, March 1, 1995, <https://fair.org/home/the-rise-of-the-right-wing-media-machine/> (accessed October 30, 2020).

¹⁸⁵ Oscar Winberg, “When It Comes to Harassing the Media, Trump Is No Nixon: Trump Challenges the Press. Nixon Changed It,” *The Washington Post*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/10/16/when-it-comes-to-harassing-the-media-trump-is-no-nixon/> (accessed April 16, 2020).

¹⁸⁶ Lucia Graves, “Trump’s Attacks Against a Biased Liberal Media Obscure One Fact: It Doesn’t Exist,” *The Guardian*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/02/trump-biased-liberal-media-television> (accessed April 28, 2020).

show that it is difficult to determine how biased the news media actually is, as it depends on where one looks. But it also indicates that the general media environment is not entirely biased towards one political side.

Consequently, depending on which news media Americans consume, their “diet” is extremely different.¹⁸⁷ This leads to Americans living in different (news) realities.

2.4 The Impact of the Media Environment Change on Journalism

Not only presidents but also the journalists were influenced by the changes in the media environment. The rise of television and later online news media caused the demise of newspapers. Subscriptions plummeted and advertising revenue declined, which led to the consolidation or closing of newspapers. Staff was reduced and with it the in-depth reporting. In particular the loss of older journalists had an impact on the quality of news reporting. The ability to contextualize issues through journalistic experience over the years helped to bring a historical perspective to political events that thereby was lost.¹⁸⁸

Moreover, through social networks and globalization, the speed of communication increased further, and with that the attention span of not only citizens but also journalists shortened.¹⁸⁹ Through the extremely diverse media environment, with pressures of commercial profits and competition over news consumers, a “more frenetic” news cycle developed. Or as Amy Walters describes: “How do you keep people glued to their TVs or clicking on your websites? You need to give them shiny objects at regular intervals.”¹⁹⁰ For instance, news broadcasters have tried to capture the audience’ attention with methods like simplifying politics, increasing dramaturgical elements (e.g., using teasers, dubbing every story breaking news) or raising the “entertainment factor.” Online clickbait became a frequently used tool to get the audience’s attention. Overall, what suffered was “the deliberative discussion of issues.”¹⁹¹

This can also be seen at press conferences where “the overwhelming tendency is to ask about the day’s headline or to look for the ‘gotcha’ question, instead of addressing long-

¹⁸⁷ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 235–36.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 232–33.

¹⁸⁹ Maddalena, “Political Communication in the (Iconic) Trump Epoch”: 250; Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication and Character*, 3.

¹⁹⁰ Amy Walter, “Political Journalism and Analysis in an Age of Distrubtion,” in *Trumping Ethical Norms: Teachers, Preachers, Pollsters, and the Media Respond to Donald Trump*, ed. Louis S. Maisel and Hannah E. Dineen, 32–7 (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 34.

¹⁹¹ Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler, “Political Communication — Old and New Media Relationships”: 172; Frantzich, *Presidents and the Media*, 49.

term accountability issues.” The idea is “not to get information, but to get a reaction.”¹⁹² Stephen Farnsworth argues that for politicians this means that they have to adapt and bring across their ideas and policies in brief and simple forms, ideally with entertainment value, to be heard.¹⁹³ As through new technology the amount of information that people are confronted with has increased drastically, the information processing ability of people is limited. “Short, simple and entertaining” thus has become one tool to get people’s attention that works well in the current media environment.

3. *Public Environment*

The historical development of the attitude of the public towards politics, the media, and their peers plays an important role in how these actors communicate with each other. Therefore, one major aspect of political communication is the trust of the American public in their presidents, the media, and their peers. It influences how the public perceives the communication of presidents, and the media and how receptive it is to their messages. For this reason, the environment for political communication of the American public is described in terms of its trust in the other actors and itself in the following chapter.

3.1 Americans’ Trust in their Government

The Americans’ trust in their government is an important quantity which helps to understand the relationship of the American public to its leaders. Since 1958, the *National Election Study* surveys Americans’ trust in government. *Figure 2* shows the development of trust according to the study since the Eisenhower administration.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Milligan, “The Presidency and the Press”: 24.

¹⁹³ Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication and Character*, 7.

¹⁹⁴ “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021,” *Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/> (accessed October 12, 2021).

Public trust in government near historic lows

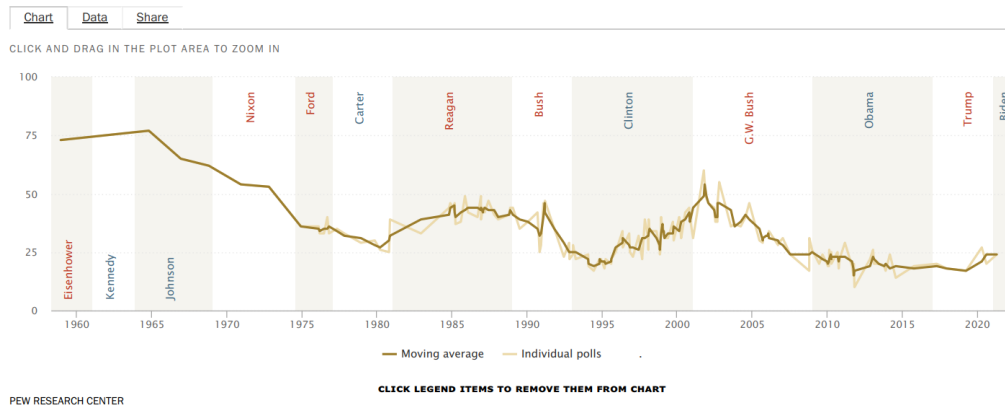


Figure 2: Public Trust in Government 1958-2021¹⁹⁵

In 1958, 73 percent of Americans indicated that they “trust[ed] the government in Washington to do what’s right ‘just about always [...] or ‘most of the time.” However, only 24 percent did in 2021, meaning that the trust of Americans in government was close to historic lows.¹⁹⁶ Interestingly, today Democrats or Democratic-leaning independents (36%) trust government more than Republicans or Republican-leaning independents (9%) do. In contrast, during the Kennedy presidency trust on both sides was over 70 percent. Over the course of Nixon’s presidency, Democrats’ trust fell from 66 to 36 percent and Republicans rose until October 1972 from 60 to 62 percent but then fell steeply to 38 percent. Trust has since then gone up and down for both sides. Typically, members of the president’s party have more trust in government. This is specifically true for Republicans. During Obama’s presidency, Democrats’ trust varied between 13 to 37 percent, Republican’s trust between 7 and 24 percent. During Trump’s presidency, Democrats’ trust was between 12 and 18 percent, Republicans’ trust between 21 and 36 percent.¹⁹⁷

The more distrustful the public is of government or the president, the harder it gets for the president to convince the public of his policies. The distrust in government in the U.S. is multiplied by the partisan polarization of Americans. The next two sections explore this further.

¹⁹⁵ “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021,” *Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/> (accessed October 12, 2021). Courtesy Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The opinions expressed herein, including any implications for policy, are those of the author and not of Pew Research Center.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

3.2 Americans' Trust in the News Media

During the 1970s, “most Americans regarded [the networks] as objective and trustworthy.” This stands in complete contrast to today, where public trust in mass media is much lower, especially among Republicans.¹⁹⁸ A *Gallup* poll which was first conducted in 1972 and annually since 1997 found that 68 percent of Americans trusted mass media in 1972. The percentage peaked in 1976 with 72 percent of Americans indicating that “they had a great deal or fair amount of trust” in mass media. However, this has changed over the decades. *Figure 3* shows the trend in Americans' trust in mass media since 1997, tracked by *Gallup*. In 2021, the percentage of Americans who trusted mass media had fallen to 36 percent. When looking at the numbers by party affiliation, it becomes clear that major gaps exist. 68 percent of Democrats, 31 percent of independents and only 11 percent of Republicans indicated trust in mass media. Whereas until 2016 trust had overall fallen for all three, the trend briefly reversed for independents and quite strongly for Democrats with the election of Donald Trump. However, another downward trend for both becomes apparent.¹⁹⁹

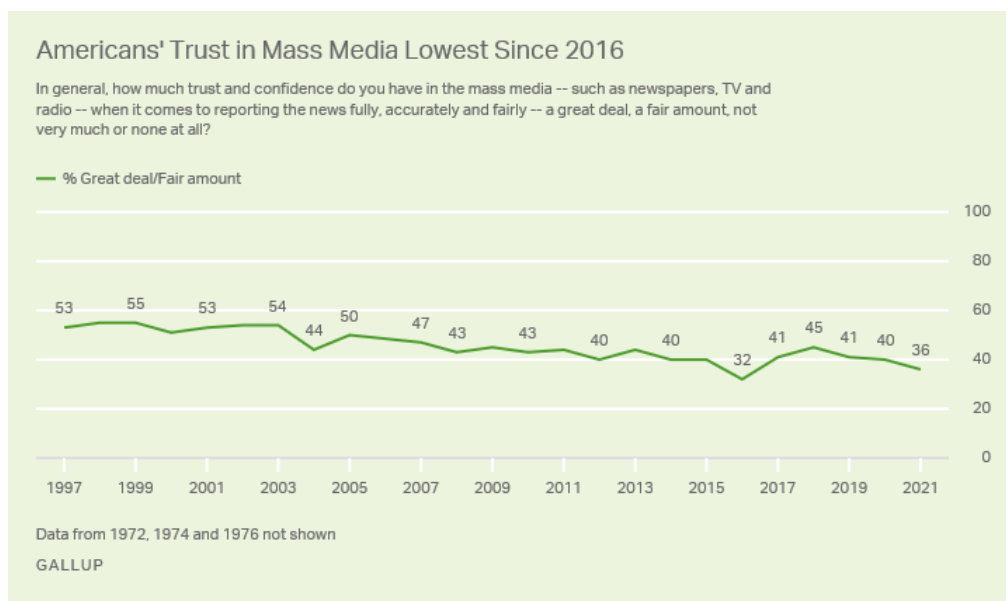


Figure 3: Americans' Trust in Mass Media 1997-2021²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Oscar Winberg, “When It Comes to Harassing the Media, Trump Is No Nixon.”

¹⁹⁹ Joseph Carroll, “Trust in News Media Rebounds Somewhat This Year,” *Gallup*, September 27, 2005, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/18766/trust-news-media-rebounds-somewhat-year.aspx> (accessed October 30, 2020); Megan Brenan, “Americans' Trust in Media Dips to Second Lowest on Record,” *Gallup*, October 7, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/355526/americans-trust-media-dips-second-lowest-record.aspx> (accessed November 12, 2021).

²⁰⁰ Used with permission of Gallup, Inc., from “Americans' Trust in Media Dips to Second Lowest on Record,” Megan Brenan, *Gallup*, October 7, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/355526/americans-trust-media-dips-second-lowest-record.aspx> (accessed November 12, 2021); permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc. An older version of the figure showing the period 1972-2005 can be found under Joseph Carroll.

Moreover, according to a study conducted in 2020 on the 30 most polarizing brands, *CNN* came in second and *Fox News* third. When looking at the ten most unfavorable brands by party division, *Fox News* ranked second with 43 percent among Democrats, and *CNN* ranked second with 48 percent among Republicans with neither appearing on the Republican or Democratic list, respectively.²⁰¹

The large gap between Democrats and Republicans in media trust and the disapproval of media outlets that are more aligned with the opposition party, again indicates extreme partisan polarization concerning news media outlets today.²⁰² Yet, this distrust and polarization is not only visible towards the media but also between Americans themselves.

3.3 Americans' Trust in Each Other

According to a *Pew Research* study, Americans to a large degree (78 percent) agreed “it is very important that voters are knowledgeable.” However, nearly six out of ten had “little or no confidence in the political wisdom of the American people.”²⁰³

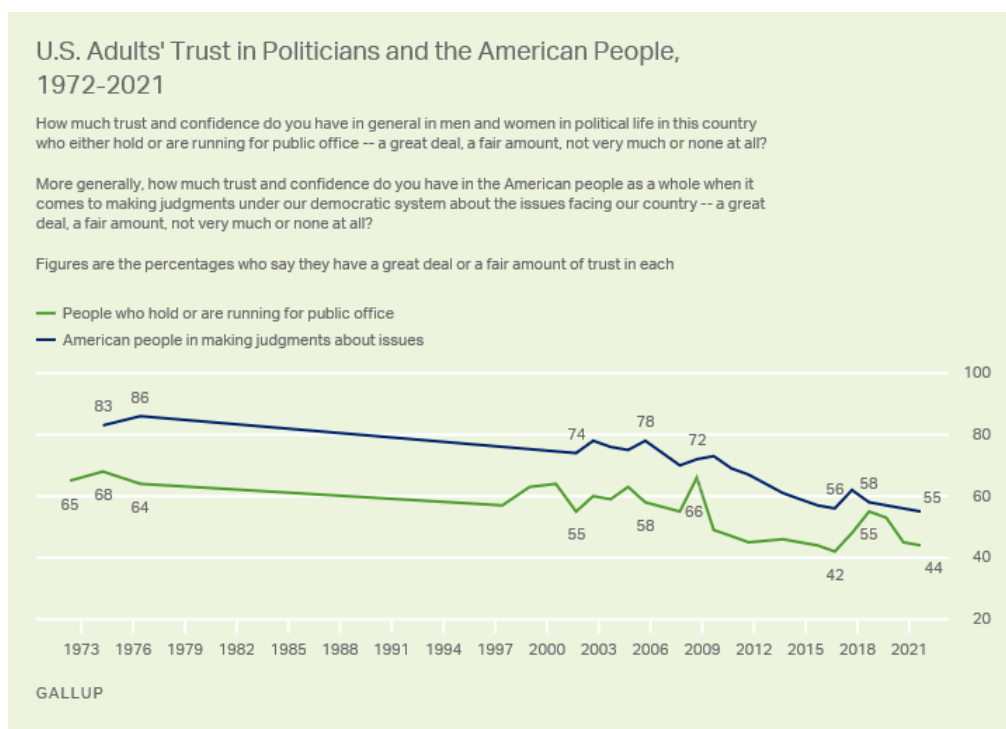


Figure 4: American Adults' Trust in Politicians and the American People²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ “The Most Polarizing Brands in America,” *Morning Consult*, January 25, 2018, <https://morningconsult.com/polarizing-brands-2018/> (accessed October 30, 2020).

²⁰² Oscar Winberg, “When It Comes to Harassing the Media, Trump Is No Nixon.”

²⁰³ “The Public, the Political System and American Democracy,” *Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/04/26/the-public-the-political-system-and-american-democracy/> (accessed November 8, 2021).

²⁰⁴ Used with permission of Gallup Inc., from “In U.S., Trust in Politicians, Voters Continues to Ebb,” Justin McCarthy, *Gallup*, October 7, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/355430/trust-politicians-voters->

This is also confirmed by a *Gallup* poll conducted first in 1974. *Figure 4* shows the trend in Americans trusting politicians in general (green graph) and their peers on judgment of political issues (blue graph). The percentage of Americans expressing trust in their peers concerning political decisions has fallen from 83 percent in 1974 to 55 percent in 2021.²⁰⁵ There are several reasons, Americans name in the survey for their low trust. One major issue is false or manufactured news. Americans think that it not only considerably influences trust in government (68 percent) but also between ordinary citizens (54 percent).²⁰⁶

Furthermore, hostility towards the other party's members has increased considerably. In 2019, 55 percent of Republicans stated that "Democrats are 'more immoral' when compared with other Americans; 47% of Democrats say the same about Republicans." Since 2016 both percentages have risen by 8 (Republicans) and 12 (Democrats) percentage points.²⁰⁷ Moreover, a study by the *Pew Research Center* showed that Democrats and Republicans "cannot agree on basic facts."²⁰⁸ This is troubling as it indicates that Americans do not think that they "share a common set of truths and ideals as a nation."²⁰⁹ But there are things that Americans agree on. 85 percent stated, "the tone and nature of political debate in the country has become more negative [...] [and] less respectful." 76 percent said public discourse is less based on facts and 60 percent stated that it has become "less focused on issues than in the past."²¹⁰

continues-ebb.aspx (accessed November 12, 2021); permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. The figure might lead to the conclusion that since 2006 there has been a particularly steep decline in trust of Americans in each other. Yet, it must be considered that there was no data collected between 1976 and 2001, thus the very straight line of the graph. Whether and how much trust has varied in this period remains unknown for this poll.

²⁰⁶ Amy Mitchell et al., "Many Americans Say Made-up News Is a Critical Problem That Needs to Be Fixed," *Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2019/06/05/many-americans-say-made-up-news-is-a-critical-problem-that-needs-to-be-fixed/> (accessed November 9, 2021).

²⁰⁷ "Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal," *Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/10/partisan-antipathy-more-intense-more-personal/> (accessed November 3, 2021).

²⁰⁸ John Laloggia, "Republicans and Democrats Agree: They Can't Agree on Basic Facts," *Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/23/republicans-and-democrats-agree-they-cant-agree-on-basic-facts/> (accessed November 9, 2021).

²⁰⁹ Michael Dimock, "How Americans View Trust, Facts, and Democracy Today," *The Pew Charitable Trusts*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/winter-2020/how-americans-view-trust-facts-and-democracy-today> (accessed October 14, 2021).

²¹⁰ "Public Highly Critical of State of Political Discourse in the U.S.," *Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/06/19/public-highly-critical-of-state-of-political-discourse-in-the-u-s/> (accessed November 4, 2021).

Besides these developments, when not asked about politics, Americans think highly of their peers. Majorities are convinced that most Americans obey laws, support people in need and faithfully pay their taxes. Furthermore, over 80 percent of Americans are convinced that trust in government and trust in each other are improvable.²¹¹

Overall, this section showed that the public's opinion of the leaders and the media and even about their peers is highly relevant for political communication. Low trust in politicians plus partisan polarization influences how much and with what information the public can be reached by politicians and the media. Thus, for a Democratic politician to reach Republican voters or vice versa can turn out to be nearly impossible. This is the same for conservative media outlets trying to reach a liberal part of the public. The inverse is also true. Adding on top the Internet, which – with all its advantages – made it easier to spread untruths, leads to a highly complex environment presidents and the media must act in.

²¹¹ Lee Rainie, Scott Keeter and Andrew Perrin, "Trust and Distrust in America," *Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/> (accessed November 3, 2021).

IV. John F. Kennedy

I. John F. Kennedy and the Media

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born on May 29, 1917, and enjoyed an elite upbringing. His father, Joseph P. Kennedy, a Harvard graduate and multimillionaire, encouraged his children “to prove that no position was too lofty for a Kennedy.” From 1936 until 1940, John Kennedy studied at Harvard University. His thesis, intensely revised by Arthur Krock, *The New York Times* Washington bureau chief, was published under the title *Why England Slept*. It became quite successful, partially because his father bought thirty thousand copies.²¹²

In 1941, Kennedy joined the Navy and while on duty in the Pacific in 1943, his patrol torpedo (PT) was hit by a Japanese destroyer and sank. Kennedy, in command of the PT, gathered his crew and swam with an injured crew member to an island miles away. Due to his actions, the Navy awarded him the Navy and Marine Corps Medal and the Purple Heart Medal.²¹³ After his military service he shortly worked as a correspondent for the *Hearst Newspapers* before entering politics as a Democratic Representative from Massachusetts in 1947.²¹⁴

After serving three terms in the House, Kennedy successfully ran against the incumbent Republican U.S. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1952.²¹⁵ During his time as junior senator from Massachusetts, he married Jacqueline Bouvier with whom he had three children (only two survived infancy). In 1956, he published his second and mainly ghostwritten book *Profiles in Courage*, which received a Pulitzer Prize in 1957.²¹⁶

Four years after he had given an impressive speech at the Democratic Convention, Kennedy announced his run for the presidency.²¹⁷ After a tight race, Kennedy defeated his Republican opponent Richard Nixon by a narrow margin in 1960 and was inaugurated as the 35th President of the United States on January 20, 1961.²¹⁸

²¹² Michael Kazin, “John F. Kennedy,” in *The American Presidency*, ed. Alan Brinkley and Davis Dyer, 397–408 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 397, 399-400.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 400.

²¹⁴ Marc J. Selverstone, “John F. Kennedy: Life Before the Presidency,” *Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/president/kennedy/life-before-the-presidency> (accessed March 10, 2021).

²¹⁵ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 297–98.

²¹⁶ Marc J. Selverstone, “John F. Kennedy: Life Before the Presidency.”

²¹⁷ Ron Simon, “See How JFK Created a Presidency for the Television Age,” *Time Magazine*, May 29, 2017, <https://time.com/4795637/jfk-television/> (accessed November 2, 2020).

²¹⁸ Michael Kazin, “John F. Kennedy,” in *The American Presidency*, 401.

Once in the White House, the Cold War was the major foreign policy challenge, which would evolve into a particularly dangerous crisis (see IV.4). Domestically, the issue Kennedy attempted to avoid as long as possible – civil rights – started to become more and more difficult to ignore in 1963. Although Kennedy then publicly took a stance and proposed a civil rights bill, it was Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy’s vice president and successor, who successfully fought for it in Congress after his death. His public assassination less than three years in his first term on November 22, 1963, turned John F. Kennedy into an icon with a heroic reputation that critical historians could barely diminish.²¹⁹

The 35th President of the United States is known for not only recognizing the media’s political potential but also for taking advantage of it. Kennedy was a master in managing or – as it is occasionally called – manipulating the news media.²²⁰ According to Joseph Berry, it “was a key factor in the political career of John F. Kennedy.” Manipulating the media is often seen as something negative, but at least Kennedy did not share these negative associations and rather viewed “himself as a colleague of the press.”²²¹ During his time in politics, Kennedy was accessible to reporters and according to his speechwriter Theodore Sorensen took pleasure in interacting with reporters not only formally but also informally.²²² He borrowed the journalists’ pens when in a hurry and, at times, flattered reporters when seeking their advice – yet he typically would not follow it.²²³

During his presidential campaign, Kennedy gained the appreciation of correspondents.²²⁴ As campaigning involved lots of traveling, not only for the candidates but also the correspondents covering the campaign, how candidates treated the press had a major effect on the relationship. The Kennedy campaign tried to facilitate the correspondents’ job, for instance, by handing out transcripts of Kennedy’s speeches right after he had held them. Thus, correspondents could sit back and simply listen to Kennedy as they did not have to transcribe the speeches on the fly.²²⁵ Another example is that important campaign announcements were scheduled in time for the media’s deadlines.²²⁶ Moreover, Kennedy

²¹⁹ Ibid., 397, 402-403, 406-407.

²²⁰ Joseph P. Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 1.

²²¹ Ibid., 2.

²²² Ibid., 52; Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 310–11.

²²³ Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, 53.

²²⁴ Ibid., 50.

²²⁵ Ibid., 51.

²²⁶ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 311.

was blessed with a valuable communication skill for having good media relations: He could quarrel with the media “without causing permanent rifts.”²²⁷

Kennedy liked using humor in his interactions with the media and the public. He knew that humor, and especially humor targeted at himself, connected him with his audience and made him a more appealing and charismatic politician. Moreover, it won him the media’s attention.²²⁸ Sorensen writes that they even kept a folder with collections of humorous anecdotes (“humor folder”) they referred to when looking for entertaining bits to include in speeches.²²⁹ As discussed, Kennedy’s humor surfaced frequently during his news conferences (see IV.2, and IV.4.2).

Kennedy was aware “that good pictures were the lifeblood of politics,” and thus he paid special attention to favorable photographs. As senator, for example, he had up-to-date photographs sent to Massachusetts newspapers, so that they would stop using what he perceived as unflattering pictures of his early congressional times.²³⁰

However, Kennedy was not free of displeasure with the media. In an interview, he admitted that he did not like negative news coverage but argued for the importance of a free press. He stated that he saw the media as “an invaluable arm of the Presidency [sic!]” and declared that through the media he was able to acquire more information on topics which helped him to “do the job.”²³¹ That Kennedy did not always enact this attitude, will be seen in Sections IV.4.2 and IV.4.3.

Kennedy also perceived his close interaction with the media as both a way to get more positive news coverage and “to make the news more objective and accurate.”²³² Regardless of his generally good relations, the media would criticize him and his politics. He would reach out to the responsible person, inform them of his disapproval, and “seek ‘corrections.’”²³³ Obviously, the journalists would not perceive such efforts as making their reporting more accurate.²³⁴

Sorensen stated that Kennedy “could never stay angry at either friends or strangers in the newspaper profession,” however this is not a true statement as the following example

²²⁷ Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, 3.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

²²⁹ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 62.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

²³¹ “Television and Radio Interview: After Two Years - a Conversation with the President,” *The American Presidency Project*, December 17, 1962, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/television-and-radio-interview-after-two-years-conversation-with-the-president> (accessed April 9, 2020).

²³² Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, 69.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 59.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

shows.²³⁵ Kennedy also excluded journalists that were critical of him. A famous case concerns Arthur Krock, a longtime associate of Kennedy's father who as mentioned, had helped him revise his BA thesis. In an interview in 1964, Krock was asked about his relationship with Kennedy during his presidential campaign in 1960. According to Krock, this was "the most painful period personally," as he was torn between his political beliefs and his "deep affection and admiration for the late President and [...] his family." The 1960 Democratic Party Platform included civil rights, and as Krock opposed the movement, he thought that Nixon was the better choice. He recounted that he knew of the displeasure he caused in the Kennedy team with his criticism as he, for instance, was called by Joseph Kennedy several times and asked to give his son "a fair break." Moreover, Krock got to know that although *The New York Times* had endorsed Kennedy, the presidential candidate was still displeased as one paragraph of the endorsement was critical of him. Kennedy instantly attributed the critical paragraph to Krock, who, however, had not contributed to the editorial endorsement. While these differences had not yet destroyed his relationship with Kennedy, the final break occurred in 1963, after he had criticized Kennedy in an article. The president told a relative who then informed Krock that he was "never going to have anything more to do with him [Krock]." According to Arthur Krock, although their paths crossed again at events, Kennedy stayed true to his word and never contacted him again.²³⁶ Krock was not the only journalist who was excluded after critical coverage, but his case is particularly significant as he used to be a longtime family associate.

To summarize, Kennedy was not free of holding grudges against reporters, and at times they led to the exclusion of journalists. However, his general interaction with the media was characterized by accessibility and positive relations. Kennedy's attitude to the media might be best described by what Sorensen called "a curious dichotomy":

[Kennedy] regarded newsmen as his natural friends and newspapers as his natural enemies. [...] He both assisted and resented the press corps as they dogged his every footstep. He had an inexhaustible capacity to take displeasure from what he read [...] and an equally inexhaustible capacity to keep on reading more than anyone else in Washington. He always expected certain writers and publications to be inconsistent and inaccurate, but was always indignant when they were. [...] He could find and fret over one paragraph of criticism deep

²³⁵ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 315.

²³⁶ Krock, Arthur: Oral History Interview - JFK #1, 5/10/1964, John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, John F. Kennedy Oral History Interviews, 1964-2012, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (JFKL), 17-18, 20-22.

in ten paragraphs of praise. He dispensed few favors to his journalistic friends, but ardently wooed his journalistic foes. He had an abhorrence of public relations gimmicks, but was always acutely aware of what impression he was making. [...] few, if any, Presidents could have been more accessible and less guarded with individual reporters and editors – or more outraged when anyone else ‘leaked’ a story.²³⁷

Sorensen explained that this dichotomy reflected the opposing roles and different interest that politicians and the media have, meaning that conflict between the two parties was inevitable. Kennedy was aware of this, telling Sorensen: “Always remember [...] that their interests and ours ultimately conflict.”²³⁸

However, the president’s and media’s interest did not seem to always conflict. On two personal issues the media did not publish the information they had, but rather (actively) kept it secret. One was Kennedy’s relationships with women. The president frequently had affairs with women during his time at the White House (and also before the presidency). The media knew about the president’s affairs but decided against publishing stories on them. Marvin Kalb, a correspondent for *CBS News* during the Kennedy administration, explained that “in those days, the possibility of a presidential affair, while titillating, was not considered ‘news’ by the mainstream press” when other issues as the threat of nuclear warfare or “racial tension were [...] clawing at the soul of the nation.”²³⁹ Moreover, the president’s private life was in general considered to be private, much more than today, and the assumption of the media that administrations were hiding information purposefully has increased drastically since then (see III.1 and III.2).

The other issue – which due to medications could have implicated the president’s ability to do his job – was Kennedy’s health. Throughout his life, Kennedy was plagued by illnesses.²⁴⁰ Speculations about his health had come up several times during his political

²³⁷ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 311.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 312–13.

²³⁹ Ralph G. Martin, *A Hero for Our Time: An Intimate Story of the Kennedy Years* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1983), 312; Marvin Kalb, *One Scandalous Story: Clinton, Lewinsky, and Thirteen Days That Tarnished American Journalism* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 2001), 3–6. For detailed accounts on President Kennedy’s affairs refer to Martin 311-323.

²⁴⁰ In 2002, some of Kennedy’s medical records were made accessible. These documents confirmed speculations that Kennedy was afflicted with Addison’s disease, a primary adrenal insufficiency where the adrenal glands do not produce sufficient cortisol. If symptoms worsen and stay untreated, the condition can be life-threatening. In addition, Kennedy had several other medical problems, such as lower back pain or infections, which were treated with different drugs. For further information on Kennedy’s illnesses see Robert Dallek, “The Medical Ordeals of JFK,” *The Atlantic*, 290, no. 5 (2002), 49–61: 49–52. Information on Addison’s disease and its effects can be found at the website of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases <https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/endocrine-diseases/adrenal-insufficiency-addisons-disease#prepare> (accessed May 27, 2021).

career, but were frequently denied by him, his family and aides.²⁴¹ For Kennedy's aim to become president, it was important to hide his afflictions, or the amount of medication he needed, as this information would probably have disqualified him in the public's eye. After becoming president, Kennedy was also very focused on keeping his illnesses concealed. In one instance, he was very hesitant to start therapy as the physician had to frequently come to the White House to supervise the treatment, and the president feared media attention and rumors.²⁴² However, Kennedy did not only cover up his diseases but on the contrary tried to actively portray an "image of youthful energy."²⁴³ Photographs taken during his presidency portray a vigorous man, who played golf or went sailing.²⁴⁴ Though, in reality, his illnesses kept him from pursuing such activities.

Despite all his efforts, Kennedy was not able to completely cover up his ailments from the media. But instead of reporting about health issues, the media promoted Kennedy's healthy image. According to the former *New York Times* correspondent Tom Wicker, a "complacent belief among reporters" existed. This meant that reporters believed that the administration told them the truth about Kennedy's health although there had been speculations about health problems and some indications of medication, as for example a swollen face. Wicker later concluded that reporters had not fulfilled their duty and that they had not "work[ed] hard enough to find out the facts."²⁴⁵

This cooperative relationship was also evident during Kennedy's press conferences.

2. John F. Kennedy and his News Conferences

Renowned journalists Walter Shapiro wrote: "But were JFK's press conferences really that remarkable? Well, yes."²⁴⁶ Shapiro further described the news conferences as "an art form" and argued that the 35th President of the United States had set "the gold standard of presidential Q-and-A's."²⁴⁷ While the assessment by Shapiro is full of praise, scholars agree that the live televised news conferences suited him. Kennedy was able to display his decisiveness and knowledge of facts while showcasing his wit and candor.²⁴⁸ With that,

²⁴¹ Lawrence K. Altman, "The Doctor's World; Disturbing Issue of Kennedy's Secret Illness," *The New York Times*, October 6, 1992.

²⁴² Robert Dallek, "The Medical Ordeals of JFK," *The Atlantic*, 290, no. 5 (2002), 49–61: 60–1.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁴⁴ Photographs can be found on the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum's website.

²⁴⁵ Tom Wicker, "Introduction," in *Four Days in November: The Original Coverage of the John F. Kennedy Assassination*, ed. Robert B. Semple, 1–20 (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 17–18.

²⁴⁶ Walter Shapiro, "Meet the Press," *The New Republic*, February 9, 2009, <https://newrepublic.com/article/62398/meet-the-press> (accessed February 13, 2020).

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Press conferences were officially called news conferences during Kennedy's presidency.

²⁴⁸ Martha Joynt Kumar, "Presidential Press Conferences"; Walter Shapiro, "Meet the Press."

the press conferences became such attractive events – so highly popular among reporters – that they needed to be conducted in the State Department auditorium, which provided enough seats for over 200 correspondents.²⁴⁹ There, Kennedy stood behind a podium looking at numerous television cameras, photographers and the correspondents, who were seated within a few meters’ distance.²⁵⁰

The major change Kennedy introduced to the press conferences was to have them televised live. It was Press Secretary Pierre Salinger who had come up with the idea and proposed it to Kennedy. While advisors like Theodore Sorensen, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy feared mistakes that could escalate into an international conflict, Kennedy liked the idea.²⁵¹ Likewise, not everybody in the news media favored the live televised news conferences at the beginning. *New York Times* reporter James Reston, for instance, called it “the goofiest idea since the hula hoop.”²⁵² Others worried “that show-business value would trump substance.”²⁵³

The preparation for the news conferences was extensive. Kennedy studied data and facts on numerous topics to have them ready during the Q&A. Moreover, aides had to prepare potential questions, though, according to Sorensen, typically the questions of the correspondents were significantly easier.²⁵⁴ William Boot’s assessment of the questions’ difficulty level goes into the same direction. Yet, his judgement is much harsher, arguing that the president “occasionally faced some tough questioning, but often it was exceedingly flaccid, timid, deferential, or dull.” Boot argues that Kennedy’s news conferences “were generally not sparkling” and “hardly a battle of wits.”²⁵⁵ It is true that the White House press corps generally did not ask particularly difficult questions and relied much more on information provided by the administration (this changed with the Nixon administration, see III.2, and V.4.1). However, what made Kennedy’s news conferences so memorable was less what the press corps did, but much more his demeanor and the way Kennedy answered questions (see following analysis in IV.4.2). Yet, it is undeniable that when questions were more friendly, the president could be more relaxed, and it might be easier to give witty answers.

²⁴⁹ Martha Joynt Kumar, “Presidential Press Conferences.”

²⁵⁰ Kumar, “Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum”: 183.

²⁵¹ Salinger, Pierre E. G.: Oral History Interview - JFK #2, 8/10/1965, John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, John F. Kennedy Oral History Interviews, 1964-2012, JFKL, 108–9.

²⁵² James Reston, “The Problem of Holding a Political Balance,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 1961, 46.

²⁵³ Walter Shapiro, “Meet the Press.”

²⁵⁴ Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, 141; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 323–24.

²⁵⁵ William Boot, “Capital Letter,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 25, no. 4 (1986), 11–20: 12.

At 6 p.m. on January 25, 1961, Kennedy held his first live televised news conference in the State Department Auditorium.²⁵⁶ The 37-minute-long conference was watched by about 65 million Americans.²⁵⁷ At the beginning, President Kennedy appeared to be uncomfortable and a bit stiff while being asked questions on various topics. Yet, over time Kennedy looked to be more at ease. Two instances where he used humor stand out. The first time Kennedy made a joke during an answer, the correspondence laughed, and one can see the realization on the president's face of the effect of humor. He used humor again later, this time with a big smile on his face, already having learned how beneficial and disarming humor could be. At the end of the news conference, Kennedy smiled and looked content towards the dissolving crowd.²⁵⁸ His wit and humor would from then on frequently surface during his press conferences.

On average ten percent of the total population watched Kennedy's news conferences, and in 1961 a poll found that, out of the first three news conferences, 90 percent of the participants had seen at least one.²⁵⁹ Kennedy expanded his reach even further and held the first internationally broadcasted news conference on July 23, 1962.²⁶⁰

The president not only changed the press conference settings but also knew how to use them to his political advantage. He often made use of opening statement to make announcements or set the agenda. On April 11, 1962, Kennedy famously used his opening statement to counter a domestic political problem he faced with the steel industry. The Kennedy administration had helped to broker an agreement between the United Steelworkers' union and the United States Steel Corporation. The deal, according to the Kennedy administration's understanding, was that a minor wage increase of 2.5 percent would in return mean no price increases. Similar contracts were made by other steel companies and the union. But this understanding was not shared by U.S. Steel, and a couple of days after the end of the negotiations, the company raised prices. Several other steel

²⁵⁶ Walter Shapiro, "Meet the Press."

²⁵⁷ Andrew Glass, "JFK Holds a Televised News Conference, Jan. 25, 1961," *Politico*, January 25, 2013, <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/01/this-day-in-politics-086685> (accessed April 9, 2020).

²⁵⁸ "The President's News Conference | January 25, 1961," *The American Presidency Project*, January 25, 1961, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-196> (accessed November 16, 2022); "President John F. Kennedy's First Televised News Conference of January 25, 1961 | Video," *JFKL YouTube Channel*, January 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFde6u-OPj8> (accessed November 16, 2022), 14:53–14:56, 21:20–21:24, 37:01.

²⁵⁹ "John F. Kennedy and the Press," *JFKL*, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/john-f-kennedy-and-the-press> (accessed November 16, 2022); "Population, Total - United States," *The World Bank*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=US> (accessed November 16, 2022).

²⁶⁰ Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, 23.

companies went along with this price increase.²⁶¹ According to Richard Godden and Richard Maidment, Kennedy was concerned “that his credentials as a mediator would be irredeemably damaged.” Thus, he attacked the steel industry’s management.²⁶² One day after the price increase, Kennedy fiercely criticized the steel industry in the opening statement of his news conference. He claimed that “a tiny handful of steel executives whose pursuit of private power and profit exceeds their sense of public responsibility” and revealed “utter contempt for the interests of 185 million Americans.” The opening statement was so powerful that the correspondent asking the first question observed “unusually strong language” by Kennedy. Moreover, over half of the following questions were connected to the steel price increase.²⁶³ When listening to the audio of this news conference, Kennedy’s anger is clearly audible as he spoke with a very dominant and clear-cut voice during his statement.²⁶⁴ Besides Kennedy’s statement, the administration deployed further measures. The FBI questioned employees and reporters and the administration announced to transfer government contracts to steel companies which had not increased prices yet.²⁶⁵ Certainly, the public criticism in the opening statement was not the only factor leading to the companies having to revoke their price increases. But it played an important role by initiating the general crisis promotion, thereby greatly raising public and media pressure on the steel companies. Moreover, it showed the understanding of Kennedy on how to use the news conferences to his advantage.

Overall, Kennedy proved his critics for live televising press conferences wrong. He introduced changes that matched his abilities. With a calm appearance and rhetorical competence, he exhibited his knowledge, used humor, and portrayed himself as a strong leader.²⁶⁶ Thus, Kennedy became a glamorous figure, and it became attractive for journalists to have access to the White House. At the same time, his news conferences developed into “a symbol of his successful use of television to promote his active agenda.”²⁶⁷ This was not the only way he used television.

²⁶¹ Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 284, 296, 298.

²⁶² Richard Godden and Richard Maidment, “Anger, Language and Politics: John F. Kennedy and the Steel Crisis,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 10, no. 3 (1980), 317–31: 318.

²⁶³ “The President’s News Conference | April 11, 1962,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-194> (accessed November 16, 2022).

²⁶⁴ Press Conference, April 11, 1962 | Audio, White House Audio Collection, White House Audio Recordings, 1961-1963, JFKL, 00:10–07:05.

²⁶⁵ Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 298–99.

²⁶⁶ Ron Simon, “See How JFK Created a Presidency for the Television Age.”

²⁶⁷ Martha Joynt Kumar, “Presidential Press Conferences.”

3. John F. Kennedy and Television

Kennedy is often described as the first television president. However, television had already been an influential medium in presidential politics and used by Truman as well as Eisenhower. Yet, Kennedy made it “the center piece of modern campaigns” and reinforced its role for the presidency and political communication. He used the media that broadcast him to directly talk to Americans.²⁶⁸ Sorensen even argued that “no problem of the Presidency concerned him [Kennedy] more than that of public communication.”²⁶⁹

His telegenic appearance surely helped his successful use of television. In contrast to his three direct predecessors, all older and balding, Kennedy – with his full hair and charisma – looked young and attractive.²⁷⁰ By skillfully using the medium that suited him so well, he “cemented the new role that imagery would play in presidential politics and leadership.”²⁷¹

Kennedy had realized the importance and possibilities of television very early on. His television use prior to his presidency and particularly during his presidential campaign was unprecedented. Indeed, Berry argues that Kennedy “without television [...] probably would never have become president.”²⁷²

However, he did not possess the ability to successfully interact and deal with the media from the beginning, he learned it over the course of his political career.²⁷³ It took some stiff appearances during the early 1950s for him to realize the importance of a television image. Nevertheless, Kennedy still belonged to the early adopters of the new medium, and he had found an understanding of the influence of a television image by 1953. In October that year, he demonstrated his skills in an interview on the television show *Person to Person* hosted by Edward R. Murrow. Kennedy had learned to mix personal with political talk and masterfully displayed his television persona by “switch[ing] within seconds from talking about the Taft-Hartley Act to his love of football.”²⁷⁴ For Kennedy to recognize his flaws and transform his behavior demonstrates his understanding of the importance of television. In 1959, Kennedy wrote an article for the *TV Guide* about his views on television. He stressed “the revolutionary impact of television” and how it “altered drastically the nature of” politics. Although he warned that television “can be abused by demagogues,” he

²⁶⁸ Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 44–46.

²⁶⁹ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 310.

²⁷⁰ Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, 91.

²⁷¹ Susan J. Douglas, “Presidents and the Media,” in *Recapturing the Oval Office*, 153.

²⁷² Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, 147.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁷⁴ Ron Simon, “See How JFK Created a Presidency for the Television Age.”

pointed to the positive effect that it had on politics. Kennedy wrote that “40 years ago Woodrow Wilson exhausted his body and mind” by traveling the country for weeks to directly reach voters. President Eisenhower, in comparison, was able to talk to millions of Americans “in one 15-minute period without ever leaving his office.” He further showed that he realized how powerful the audience can be: “Without your [audience’s] approval, [...] no politician can exist.” Moreover, Kennedy noted that “the slick or bombastic orator, pounding the table [...] is not as welcome in the family living room,” displaying that he knew about the different demeanor television required.²⁷⁵

This deep understanding of the new medium became obvious during Kennedy’s presidential campaign which, according to Robert Dallek, was “the first truly modern presidential campaign.”²⁷⁶ There were several aspects that were new. While running for the Democratic nomination, Kennedy scheduled an appearance on the talk show *Tonight Starring Jack Paar* which had never been done before by a major politician. Paar recalled that Kennedy instantly fascinated the audience. The interview was so successful that Kennedy’s father thanked Paar via a call.²⁷⁷ When looking at segments of the interview, Paar’s assessment can be reinforced: Kennedy looked very calm and presidential. He spoke clearly but with a dose of humor.²⁷⁸ In some ways, Kennedy pioneered this, and politicians running for the highest office appeared more and more frequently on talk shows. These days, it seems almost mandatory for candidates but also presidents and administration officials to follow this example.

Another aspect that has been analyzed extensively over the years are the four television debates between him and his Republican opponent Richard Nixon. An issue often discussed is the physical appearance of the two candidates. During the first debate, Kennedy’s blue shirt and suit provided a distinct contrast to the grey studio background on black and white television and made him appear sharp. In addition, he looked healthy through his tan. Nixon, in contrast, wore a grey outfit, which made him blend into the background. Moreover, he had lost weight and looked exhausted.²⁷⁹ Polling after the first

²⁷⁵ John F. Kennedy, “A Force That Has Changed the Political Scene,” *TV Guide*, November 14, 1959, Reprint under: https://museum.tv/debateweb/html/equalizer/print/tvguide_jfkforce.htm (accessed February 18, 2020).

²⁷⁶ Quoted in Don Gonyea, “How JFK Fathered the Modern Presidential Campaign,” *NPR*, November 13, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/11/16/245550528/jfk-wrote-the-book-on-modern-presidential-campaigns?t=1587715773694> (accessed April 24, 2020).

²⁷⁷ Ron Simon, “See How JFK Created a Presidency for the Television Age.”

²⁷⁸ “JFK on Jack Paar Show, 1960 | June 16, 1960 | Video,” *LPXI YouTube Channel*, December 18, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIkZK-Z21Pw> (accessed November 16, 2022).

²⁷⁹ Mary A. Watson, *The Expanding Vista: American Television in the Kennedy Years* (Durham, UK: Duke University Press, 1994), 12.

debate said that Kennedy had won. There were some who claimed that Nixon won amongst the people who followed the debate on radio.²⁸⁰ This would have stressed the importance of Kennedy's physical appearance. However, this assertion was disproven by several scholars as no persuasive evidence for the claim was found.²⁸¹ According to Sorensen, Kennedy's success was his overall performance which was more "poised and more determined" than Nixon's. Concerning the questions and answers during the debates, Kennedy used many facts and prepared arguments. While Nixon seemed well prepared for some topics too, he avoided several questions and postponed his answer to a planned statement on these subjects in a future speech or report. In addition, Nixon was often vague and more defensive.²⁸² The vice president also explicitly agreed with Kennedy again and again, and already did so in the very first sentence of his opening statement.²⁸³ Moreover, Kennedy's character and behavior were adapted to the medium television. He did not use extensive gestures or a dramatic tone of voice, whereas Nixon's gesturing and his "preachy platitudes" were too superficial and political for people's living rooms.²⁸⁴ Sorensen is not the most objective source (he also admits to this in his book), however, scholars, like Dallek agreed, stating that an important factor was that Kennedy portrayed himself "as someone who [...] deserved to be president of the United States."²⁸⁵ Nixon in contrast underperformed in this debate and likely had underestimated his opponent.²⁸⁶

An interesting fact about Kennedy's use of television is that on his way to the presidency, Kennedy tried to get lots of television coverage. This changed, however, during his time in the Oval Office. Kennedy was concerned "to become the national bore," and had the number of Roosevelt's Fireside Chats counted. After he discovered that Roosevelt had held about two per year, he reduced his television appearances. According to Sorensen, "selectivity was the key," especially concerning the timing and the topics.²⁸⁷ Nevertheless,

²⁸⁰ Aniko Bodroghkozy, "The Media," in *A Companion to John F. Kennedy*, ed. Marc J. Selverstone, 187–206 (Chichester, UK: Wiley & Sons, 2014), 192.

²⁸¹ David Greenberg, "Rewinding the Kennedy-Nixon Debates - Did JFK Really Win Because He Looked Better on Television?," *Slate*, September 24, 2010, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/09/did-jfk-really-win-because-he-looked-better-on-television.html> (accessed April 24, 2020).

²⁸² Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 199–203.

²⁸³ Andreas Etges, "A Great Box-Office Actor: John F. Kennedy, Television, and the 1960 Presidential Election," in *Electoral Cultures: American Democracy and Choice*, ed. Georgiana Banita and Sascha Pöhlmann, 225–37 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), 230.

²⁸⁴ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 195, 199–200.

²⁸⁵ Quoted in Don Gonyea, "How JFK Fathered the Modern Presidential Campaign."

²⁸⁶ Andreas Etges, "A Great Box-Office Actor," in *Electoral Cultures*, 233.

²⁸⁷ Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, 141–42; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 329.

Kennedy continued to use television to circumvent the media during his presidency, calling it “his greatest weapon.”²⁸⁸

He would even allow a film crew to join meetings and discussions between him and his advisers.²⁸⁹ The resulting hour-long documentary “Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment” dealt with the “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door” integration crisis at the University of Alabama. Governor of Alabama George C. Wallace wanted to prevent two African Americans from entering to the University of Alabama by blocking the door to the registration office. The documentary covered the successful resolution of the crisis by Kennedy and his advisors which made it possible for the two African Americans to enroll. It was broadcasted four months after the crisis had occurred and portrayed the “shrewd executive power” of the administration.²⁹⁰

A major change and further possibility to directly talk to the American people were – as covered in Chapter IV.2 – Kennedy’s live televised news conferences. In an interview in 1965, Salinger explained the thought behind the idea of live televising the conferences:

We had to have a weapon by which we could go over the American press’s head to the American people. [...] There were only three or four newspapers in the entire United States that carried full transcript [sic!] of a presidential press conference. Therefore, what people read was a distillation of the press conference, what they wanted to distill out of it. We though [sic!] that they should have the opportunity to see it in full.²⁹¹

Sorensen even wrote in his book, that the news conferences’ “primary purpose was to inform and impress the public more than the press.” And Americans were impressed (see IV.2).²⁹²

Another even more direct way to communicate with the American public was an address to the nation. It allowed the president to get his message across as he wished without direct questioning or interruption by the media. Kennedy addressed the nation from the Oval Office at least 10 times during his presidency.²⁹³ He gave his likely most remembered address on October 22, 1962, about the installation of Soviet nuclear missiles on Cuba (see

²⁸⁸ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 328.

²⁸⁹ Ron Simon, “See How JFK Created a Presidency for the Television Age.”

²⁹⁰ Fred Kaplan, “When the Kennedys Took on Wallace over Integration,” *The New York Times*, January 18, 2009.

²⁹¹ Salinger, Pierre E. G.: Oral History Interview - JFK #2, 8/10/1965, 109–10.

²⁹² Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 322–23.

²⁹³ A search of the terms “Radio and Television” during the time of Kennedy’s presidency produced 14 results at the *American Presidency Project*. The results vary from Radio and Television Address, Radio and Television Report, Radio and Television Remarks, Radio and Television Message to Radio and Television Statement. At least ten of those were broadcast from the Oval Office, three from the Fish Room, for one the location at the White House is not indicated. Search done November 17, 2022.

IV.4.3). It is important to remember that as the White House had to ask the networks for a timeslot for the broadcast of an address, they were dependent on the media's cooperation.²⁹⁴ Back then this was typically not an issue, and the networks would make space in their programming for the president.

Overall, Kennedy was a master of the medium television who maximized its utility for his presidency. This mastery would help him throughout his presidency, and in particular during times of crisis, as Section IV.4.3 shows.

The following section goes into detail on Kennedy's relationship with the media during two crisis situations connected to the Cold War. It looks at how the president handled himself and his media communication during the Bay of Pigs and analyzes how he used television to circumvent the media and directly communicate with the American public during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

4. The Cold War

A central element in the Cold War was the fight for power over weaker nations by the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. It defined most nations' politics until the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.²⁹⁵ This fight was motivated by preventing the spread of the other superpower's philosophy while at the same time expanding their own.²⁹⁶

Through proxy-wars, the two superpowers avoided direct military conflict between themselves, yet they tried to contain the influence of the other around the globe by supporting adverse sides of regional conflicts. Closely connected is the domino theory, where American leaders feared that if one country became communist, surrounding countries would also fall like dominos to communism.²⁹⁷ The longest American military involvement and proxy-war during the Cold War era was the Vietnam War.²⁹⁸ Kennedy expanded the U.S. commitment in the Vietnam War and "left a legacy of involvement for Lyndon Johnson."²⁹⁹

The major threat during the Cold War was the danger of nuclear war. During the Second World War, the United States had already used atomic bombs, targeting the cities of

²⁹⁴ Salinger, Pierre E. G.: Oral History Interview - JFK #2, 8/10/1965, 102; 126-129.

²⁹⁵ Katherine A. S. Sibley, *The Cold War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 3.

²⁹⁶ Laurie Collier Hillstrom, *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, 2015), 8.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

²⁹⁸ Sibley, *The Cold War*, 58.

²⁹⁹ Lewis L. Gould, "JFK: Celebrity in the White House," *BBC*, November 21, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/kennedy_celebrity_01.shtml (accessed April 24, 2020).

Nagasaki and Hiroshima in Japan, by that killing about 200,000 people. Thus, the weapons were already available when tensions between the superpowers were rising. Until the end of August 1949, the United States still had a monopoly in nuclear arms technology. However, this changed, when on August 29th, the Soviet Union conducted a successful test of an atomic bomb, spurring on the nuclear arms race of the two powers during the following decades to a point where they “were capable of destroying the world several times over.” These weapons also worked as deterrents, as both powers knew that would they use their weapons first, the other power had to retaliate, which would cause escalation and major destruction. This is also known as mutual assured destruction (MAD).³⁰⁰

4.1 The Cold War, the United States and Cuba

A country that became of major importance in the Cold War at the end of the 1950s and 1960s, was Cuba. After the Cuban Revolution (mid-1953 until 1959), Fidel Castro became the prime minister of the Caribbean island geographically close to the United States. Castro quickly started to reduce the island’s former strong connection to the United States by seizing plantations of foreigners, nationalizing industries, and imposing taxes on U.S. imports. This angered the Eisenhower administration, which retaliated with economic sanctions. The conflict led to a deterioration of Cuba-American relations. Castro then entered into a trade agreement with and thus became economically linked to the Soviet Union, at the beginning claiming however, to stay neutral. The United States perceived Cuba’s ties to the Soviet Union as major threat and started to devise plans to overthrow the Castro government.³⁰¹

One plan became known as the Bay of Pigs invasion. The idea was to train, equip, and fund 1,400 anti-Castro Cuban exiles who currently resided in the U.S. On April 17, 1961, the CIA-trained exiles entered Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, which is located at the southern coast of the island. Their mission was to rally Cubans behind their effort and topple Castro. However, the plan failed miserably. The Castro regime had learned beforehand of the invasion and within three days easily defeated the invaders, killing over 100 and capturing over 1.000. Some in the administration called for an invasion by U.S. forces, but President Kennedy decided against it.³⁰²

³⁰⁰ Collier Hillstrom, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 10–12.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 23, 28–29.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 30-31, 33. There were many nuclear weapons stationed in Europe, thus close the Soviet Union.

Further efforts to overthrow the Castro regime “pushed Cuba firmly into the Soviet bloc.” Not only did Castro turn to Khrushchev for goods, but he wanted financial and military support as well, which the Soviet Union “was eager to provide.” To deter the U.S. from more attempts to overthrow Castro and to “level the playing field between the Cold War rivals,” the Soviet leader decided to secretly place nuclear weapons on the island. A decision that nearly led to nuclear war.³⁰³

At the end of August 1962, the CIA got information on suspicious actions on the island. Shortly afterwards, a spy plane collected information on missiles on Cuba. To the Americans’ disadvantage, bad weather conditions hindered their spy planes to collect more photographic evidence over the next weeks. At last, on October 14, 1962, it was possible to get clear images. The content shocked the officials as the photographs revealed ballistic missiles in Cuba, which likely would be fully functional within the following two weeks. This information was troubling as these missiles had the potential to strike major U.S. cities.³⁰⁴

On October 16, 1962, President Kennedy was informed about the missiles. This date marks the start of the perilous 13-day period. The president immediately summoned the members of the Executive Committee in the National Security Council (ExComm).³⁰⁵ Over the following days, this group (and some other selected officials) in several meetings with and without Kennedy discussed options on how to best proceed. In order not to attract unwanted attention, these meetings were kept secret and the president stuck to his official schedule. In the end, President Kennedy decided on a naval blockade that solely targeted ships delivering offensive weapons to Cuba.³⁰⁶

On October 22, 1962, Kennedy informed the public on the findings in Cuba and the blockade with a nationally broadcast address (see IV.4.3). By October 23, the blockade was installed at 800 miles around the Cuban shores and the world watched worried what would happen. Within two days, the Soviet leader sent two letters, one letter with an appealing tone, and a willingness to negotiate, offering to dismantle the missiles in exchange for assurance by the U.S. not to attack Cuba and remove the blockade. The other letter was sent one day later, it was different in tone and requested that in addition American missiles in Turkey be dismantled in exchange for the ones in Cuba. Moreover,

³⁰³ Ibid., 33.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 38-39; 41.

³⁰⁵ The group was named so only a few days later.

³⁰⁶ Collier Hillstrom, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 37, 41-42, 45-46.

a message from the Soviet leader broadcast by *Radio Moscow* before the second letter had arrived in Washington seemed to confirm the more aggressive stance.³⁰⁷

Several missteps and mistakes by either side that had happened during these tense days could have led to full escalation. On October 27, a U.S. spy plane conducting reconnaissance over Cuba was shot down, killing the pilot Major Rudolf Anderson Jr. However, Kennedy was not sure that this downing was authorized by the Soviet leader (which it was not) and did not authorize the destruction of the air defense system in Cuba as some of his advisors demanded.³⁰⁸ The same day, an American pilot meant to collect data over the Arctic on nuclear testing by the Soviets accidentally deviated from his course and unintentionally got into Soviet airspace. If the Soviets had thought that the surveillance plane was a nuclear bomber, it could have caused a disastrous reaction from the Soviets. But luckily none of this led to full escalation.

On October 28, the two superpowers were able to reach a deal and with that, the greatest threat of war had passed. The Soviets would dismantle the missiles in Cuba in exchange for lifting the “quarantine” and a guarantee by the United State not to invade Cuba. Secretly, the Americans also agreed to dismantle the American missiles stationed in Turkey threatening the Soviet Union. The news was first broadcast by *Radio Moscow* and people around the world breathed a sigh of relief.³⁰⁹

On November 2, 1962, Kennedy informed the public on the progress of the dismantling of the weapons in Cuba (see IV.4.3).³¹⁰ His reputation increased through his handling of the crisis and the official deal. He was seen as the “strong leader who [...] defended democracy against the threat of communism.”³¹¹

Moreover, the Cuban Missiles crisis brought several learnings. For instance, a “hot line” (consisting of teletype machines) was established between the two countries that supported faster communication. Previously, the transmission of messages had taken several hours. Furthermore, both countries aimed to ease tensions by for instance, signing arms control agreements over the next decades.³¹²

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 46, 48, 53, 57, 59–61.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 63–64.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 64–67.

³¹⁰ John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Remarks on the Dismantling of Soviet Missile Bases in Cuba | November 02, 1962,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-and-television-remarks-the-dismantling-soviet-missile-bases-cuba> (accessed August 10, 2022).

³¹¹ Collier Hillstrom, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 73.

³¹² Ibid., 69; 72–73.

4.2 Press Conferences During the Bay of Pigs

When analyzing Kennedy's media communication during the Bay of Pigs, one must start at the beginning of April 1961, where stories of U.S. efforts to overthrow the Castro regime had surfaced, among others in *The New York Times*.³¹³ On April 12, Kennedy held a thirty-minute-long news conference where he gave average long answers, which allowed for many questions to be asked. He quickly and eloquently went through these questions and the general atmosphere was very civil, polite, and calm. Thus, overall, the conference was very typical in its proceeding. Yet, the content of two of his answers would later cause furor.³¹⁴

In his about three-minute-long opening statement, Kennedy did not mention Cuba and the connected reporting, yet the first question of the conference concerned the small island country. Kennedy was asked to what extent the U.S. was ready to support "an anti-Castro uprising or invasion of Cuba." He stated firmly, "that there will not be, under any conditions, an intervention in Cuba by the United States Armed Forces." Moreover, the administration wanted to do everything in its power "that there are no Americans involved in any actions inside Cuba."³¹⁵ When another correspondent wanted to know whether Kennedy personally viewed Fidel Castro as a communist, the president displayed his eloquence:

Well, he has indicated his admiration on many occasions for the Communist revolution; he has appointed a great many Communists to high positions. [...]

I would not want to characterize Mr. Castro except to say that by his own words he has indicated his hostility to democratic rule in this hemisphere, to democratic liberal leaders in many of the countries of the hemisphere who are attempting to improve the life of their people, and has associated himself most intimately with the Sino-Soviet bloc, and has indicated his desire to spread the influence of that bloc throughout this hemisphere.³¹⁶

³¹³ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States 1492-Present*, 3rd ed. (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2003), 440. For information on the *New York Times* reporting: Tad Szulc. "Anti-Castro Units Trained to Fight at Florida Bases." *The New York Times*. April 7, 1961, 1-2.

³¹⁴ "The President's News Conference | April 12, 1961," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-211> (accessed May 3, 2022); Press Conference, April 12, 1961 | Audio, White House Audio Collection, White House Audio Recordings, 1961-1963, JFKL, 00:22-30:23. Although Kennedy was asked in other press conferences on the Bay of Pigs invasion, for the analysis, the press conferences directly before and shortly after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion were selected as they were within or very close to the time of the crisis. Moreover, two speeches Kennedy gave in front of the press as well as one background session with the press are analyzed. They are essential to understand the development of the situation.

³¹⁵ "The President's News Conference | April 12, 1961"; Press Conference, April 12, 1961 | Audio, 02:54-04:26.

³¹⁶ "The President's News Conference | April 12, 1961."

This question aimed for a simple yes or no answer, yet Kennedy masterfully evaded this politically dangerous part of the question. At the same time, he indirectly but clearly gave insight into his stance. This eloquence also helped him to portray an image of a competent leader who was able to easily field the media's various questions on live television.

Near the end of the conference, Kennedy was again asked about Cuba, specifically "whether this Government [U.S.] will oppose any attempt to mount an offensive against Castro from this country," to which the president replied: "If your phrase 'to mount an offensive' is as I understand, I would be opposed to mounting an offensive." Overall, five out of 22 questions concerned Cuba.³¹⁷

The president's statements on Cuba were problematic as the news conference had taken place only a couple of days prior to the already authorized Bay of Pigs invasion. Although the landing force did not include Americans, not only was U.S. military equipment used in the operation, but also U.S. pilots, and the entire invasion had been planned by the CIA.³¹⁸ After the invasion had failed and U.S. involvement became known, the press and the American public were angered that Kennedy had deliberately deceived them and made him responsible for the Bay of Pigs fiasco.³¹⁹

On April 20, 1961, after the invaders had surrendered, Kennedy held a speech before the *American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE)*, which he began with:

The President of a great democracy such as ours, and the editors of great newspapers such as yours, owe a common obligation to the people: an obligation to present the facts, to present them with candor, and to present them in perspective.³²⁰

Whereas he clearly outlined the responsibilities of the president and the press in a democracy, he then did not address the Cuban invasion in such clarity and did not tell the truth about the American involvement. Kennedy repeatedly described the invasion as "a struggle of Cuban patriots against a Cuban dictator" or "efforts of a small group of young Cubans to regain their freedom." Thus, Kennedy not only concealed American involvement, but he also actively promoted the account of a Cuban-lead invasion.³²¹

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Zinn, *A People's History of the United States 1492-Present*, 440.

³¹⁹ Amy L. Heyse and Katie L. Gibson, "John F. Kennedy, 'The President and the Press,' Bureau of Advertising, American Newspaper Publishers Association, 27 April 1961," *Voices of Democracy*, 9 (2014), 23-40: 26.

³²⁰ John F. Kennedy, "Address Before the American Society of Newspaper Editors | April 20, 1961," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-the-american-society-newspaper-editors> (accessed May 6, 2022).

³²¹ Ibid. Benson analyzed in his book the development of several drafts to the final speech. In this part, he looks at a prior draft of the speech, which is in its wording at times a bit different from the final *ASNE* speech analyzed in this thesis. Yet, as the relevant themes of the final speech are the same as in the draft, Benson's analysis stays valid. This is applicable to the following analysis when Benson is consulted.

Kennedy claimed that “the armed forces of this country would not intervene in any way,” but he proceeded warning “that our restraint is not inexhaustible. [...] I want it clearly understood that this Government will not hesitate in meeting its primary obligations which are to the security of our Nation!”³²² According to Thomas Benson, this is “an oddly retrospective hypothetical,” as Kennedy warned that the U.S. armed forces would intervene in Cuba in particular situations. It was phrased as something that could only occur in the future. Benson argues that the president’s statement is “literally accurate but somewhat ambiguous and misleading.”³²³ His assessment is quite benevolent as the President’s statement was at best misleading. As mentioned above, it was true that U.S. armed forces were not part of the landing force itself, yet the U.S. had planned the invasion, provided equipment, and American pilots had been involved. Thus, U.S. forces definitely had intervened as without them the invasion would not have taken place. However, Benson is right that the speech in general “disguises U.S. responsibility while staking a claim on the intention of the United States not to ‘abandon’ Cuba.”³²⁴

The speech was broadcast nationally, reprinted by many newspapers, and extensively discussed by the media. Coverage was largely positive, playing on the themes of learning from mistakes and responsibility.³²⁵ At first, it might be surprising that the media supported Kennedy when he had just experienced a major failure and denied or at least not acknowledged the U.S. involvement in the failed invasion in Cuba. However, the speech was less focused on the actual invasion, but used it as a thematic basis for a broader topic. Kennedy contrasted the good U.S. against the evil Communists, freedom in democracies versus oppression in communist dictatorships. Moreover, he argued that “this sobering episode” was a valuable lesson for the United States, one they could learn from and then use this experience for the “survival of freedom in this hemisphere.”³²⁶ These were prominent, easy to support topics during Cold War times.

On April 21, 1961, one day after his speech, Kennedy held a news conference. The president started his press conference with a short notice on Cuba of around 40 seconds in his two-and-a-half minute-long opening statement, acknowledging that “many of you have further questions about Cuba” but denying further explanations as there would be currently

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Thomas W. Benson, *Writing JFK: Presidential Rhetoric and the Press in the Bay of Pigs Crisis* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 33–34.

³²⁴ Ibid., 35.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ John F. Kennedy, “Address Before the American Society of Newspaper Editors | April 20, 1961.”

no “useful national purpose [...] served by my going further into the Cuban question.” He then proceeded to address other issues in his opening statement.³²⁷

As with his opening statement on the steel crisis (see IV.2), Kennedy used the opportunity of the opening statement to get out the information he wanted and, in this case, set the rules. By that he managed to steer the correspondents’ questions as most correspondents would abide by the president’s rule laid out during his opening statement and not ask questions on Cuba. Only three out of 30 questions directly concerned the Cuban invasion, and even then correspondents were careful not to upset the president too much.³²⁸ Their attempt did not work, as Pierre Salinger reported that Kennedy was in fact quite angry with the questioning he had faced at the April 21 press conference.³²⁹

When the first correspondent tried to get information on Cuba, Kennedy denied answering the question by stating that “I think that the facts of the matter [...] will come out in due time. [...] I am confining myself to my statement” and after a short pause added “for good reason.”³³⁰ The next correspondent tried to get Kennedy to answer his questions on Cuba by introducing it with “this is not a question about Cuba; it's a question about Castro,” causing the room to chuckle. Kennedy is not seen in the video of the press conference during this moment, therefore his reaction to the remark stays hidden. However, Kennedy again did not provide more information in his very short answer to the question.³³¹

Later during the press conference, one correspondent asked a question on “a certain foreign policy situation” connected to the issue of transparency. He argued that the flow “of information from formerly useful sources” had stopped and complained that during the press conference Kennedy was not answering questions on the invasion. He then asked:

In view of the fact we are taking a propaganda lambasting around the world, why is it not useful, sir, for us to explore with you the real facts behind this, or our motivations?³³²

In his very elaborate answer of about three minutes, Kennedy touched upon his opinion on the difference between the flow of information in democracies and dictatorships:

³²⁷ “The President's News Conference | April 21, 1961,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-213> (accessed May 6, 2022); “President Kennedy News Conference | April 21, 1961 | Video,” *C-SPAN.org*, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?153207-1/president-kennedy-news-conference> (accessed November 17, 2022), 00:53-03:23.

³²⁸ “The President's News Conference | April 21, 1961.” There were some more questions for instance on Communism or Russia, yet they were not directly concerned with the invasion. Questions were counted by the indications in the transcript as “Q,” minus one where the President had a query concerning the question and the reporter clarified it.

³²⁹ Pierre E. Salinger, *With Kennedy* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1967), 203–204.

³³⁰ “The President's News Conference | April 21, 1961.”

³³¹ *Ibid*; “President Kennedy News Conference | April 21, 1961 | Video,” 4:10-05:42.

³³² “The President's News Conference | April 21, 1961.”

One of the problems of a free society, a problem not met by a dictatorship, is this problem of information. A good deal has been printed in the paper and I wouldn't be surprised if those of you who are members of the press will be receiving a lot of background briefings in the next day or two by interested people or interested agencies.

There's an old saying that victory has 100 fathers and defeat is an orphan. And I wouldn't be surprised if information is poured into you in regard to all of the recent activities.³³³

Kennedy expanded on his comments by using the space race as an example:

In the Soviet Union no reports were made in regard to any experiments that they carried out on 'our man in space.' I saw in a national magazine about some student who said the Americans talk a good deal about their man in space, the Soviet Union says nothing and yet it wins. That is one of the problems of a democracy competing and carrying on a struggle for survival against a dictatorship.³³⁴

The president argued that for dictatorships it is much easier to keep information secret, hinting that this gives dictatorships an advantage in comparison with democracies. But he did not yet further elaborate on the advantage in detail and what this meant for the media in democracies. Kennedy foreshadowed an issue here that he would bring up again and elaborate on in the Address before the *American Newspaper Publishers Association* one week later, which would then stir up quite some controversy.

While not giving more information on the invasion in his answers, he took responsibility for the actions in Cuba:

I have said as much as I feel can be usefully said by me in regard to the events of the past few days. Further statements, detailed discussions, are not to conceal responsibility because I'm the responsible officer of the Government – and that is quite obvious – but merely because I do not believe that such a discussion would benefit us during the present difficult situation.³³⁵

The theme of taking responsibility was covered widely in the media. The media portrayed Kennedy as to have character to assume responsibility and depicted the invasion as a lesson for Kennedy who was able to learn from the failure.³³⁶

In the video of the press conference, it is clearly recognizable that the president would have preferred not to meet the press that day as he looked very uncomfortable. In particular during the question on Cuba it seems he would have liked to leave the podium. This is a

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Benson, *Writing JFK*, 42.

stark contrast to other conferences where Kennedy looked at ease and was reflective of the pressure of the crisis.³³⁷

Although Kennedy was angry with the questioning, from today's viewpoint it is fascinating and quite inconceivable to see how easy it was for the president to deflect the questions on a major foreign policy crisis, simply stating he was not going to give further information as it would not serve a useful national purpose. Not many correspondents tried to ask questions on Cuba and if, they did so carefully. Here the different relationship of the president and the media is displayed. In contrast to today, the trust in presidents as a truthful news source was still high with the media being much less skeptical of information coming out of the White House (see III.1.2 and III.2). Moreover, what will become obvious in the following, the public standing of the president was very important, also to the media.

Only four days later, Kennedy held an off-the-record backgrounder with the White House press corps. The president answered various questions for half an hour. Out of the 18 questions (not counting follow-ups for clarification) asked, eight concerned Cuba.³³⁸ With about half of the questions on the current crisis, the backgrounder was not dominated by Cuba related questions, yet the press also did not hesitate to ask the president on the invasion as they had during the official and public press conference.

The topic of information flow in democracies and dictatorships also came up again, though in different wording. During his statement at the beginning of the backgrounder, Kennedy argued that Communist states had the ability “to operate anonymously. Everything we do is printed in the paper; and they are carrying on their struggles with all of the advantage of secrecy.”³³⁹ Later, when asked about his opinion on “the role of the press in covering para-military warfare,” Kennedy stated that “it's very difficult for a public official to discuss this matter, because it is a sensitive matter.” Nevertheless, he elaborated:

The press is rightfully concerned with any efforts to limit its reporting of events. The press, however, is a Fourth Estate, and therefore in a sense has important public responsibilities. [...] Now, this is a matter that you gentlemen have to decide in this kind of a cold war, what you should print and what you should not print. I, of course, have thoughts about it. But I must say it seems to me that this is an area where you ought to make your judgments, and perhaps consider it almost as a profession, not merely individually.³⁴⁰

³³⁷ “President Kennedy News Conference | April 21, 1961 | Video,” 00:48–32:51.

³³⁸ Benson, *Writing JFK*, 86–99. On these pages in Benson's book, a transcript of the backgrounder can be found.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 89–90.

Kennedy was already clearer regarding his opinion on what he meant by the advantages of dictatorships and how situations he considered highly dangerous to national security should be handled by the press in democracies. Yet, he still managed to phrase it in a conciliatory way by not using too strong words and leaving the decision on what to report with the media.

The atmosphere throughout the backgrounder – based on the transcript – was friendly. On several occasions in the transcript one can find “Laughter” or “Applause” in parenthesis, for instance, when he was asked how he liked being president. In his answer Kennedy displayed the wit he was so famous for: “Well, I liked it better up to about nine days ago,” causing the correspondents to laugh and applause.³⁴¹

Thus, so far, Kennedy and his administration had successfully managed the failure in the Bay of Pigs in the press and generated mainly positive coverage. Yet, two days after the backgrounder, Kennedy caused furor by again bringing up the invasion in a speech before the *American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA)*.³⁴² The speech started off in a very positive atmosphere, where Kennedy made several jokes at which the audience can be heard laughing and applauding.³⁴³ The president, for example, jokingly brought up the issue of privacy for the president and his family, pointing out that correspondents even followed them to church services:

Nor [...] are these remarks intended to examine the proper degree of privacy which the press should allow to any President and his family.

If in the last few months your White House reporters and photographers have been attending church services with regularity, that has surely done them no harm.³⁴⁴

This caused loud laughter among the audience and even the president himself chuckled at his joke.³⁴⁵

³⁴¹ Ibid., 99.

³⁴² Heyse and Gibson, “John F. Kennedy, ‘The President and the Press,’ Bureau of Advertising, American Newspaper Publishers Association, 27 April 1961”: 30.

³⁴³ Address, ‘The President and the Press,’ Before The American Newspaper Publishers Association, April 27, 1961 | Audio, White House Audio Collection, White House Audio Recordings, 1961-1963, JFKL, 00:17-05:19.

³⁴⁴ John F. Kennedy, “Address ‘The President and the Press’ Before the American Newspaper Publishers Association, New York City | April 27, 1961,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-president-and-the-press-before-the-american-newspaper-publishers-association> (accessed June 9, 2022).

³⁴⁵ Address, ‘The President and the Press,’ Before The American Newspaper Publishers Association, April 27, 1961 | Audio, 04:18–04:51.

Yet, the atmosphere changed when the president started to argue for self-censorship of the press and the room turned notably more silent.³⁴⁶ He partially blamed the media for the invasion's failure when he stated that the media had helped the enemy by publishing information on the planned invasion and vital information had "been pinpointed in the press and other news media to a degree sufficient to satisfy any foreign power."³⁴⁷ Amy Heyse and Katie Gibson rightly argue that "these were not the words of a president accepting responsibility for his role in a crisis."³⁴⁸

He further asked the media to balance the publication of information with "the need for far greater official secrecy." Although, according to Kennedy, it was the media's duty to decide on the appropriate balance, he urged "every publisher, every editor, and every newsman in the nation to reexamine his own standards" and "heed the duty of self-restraint." Despite the fact that the U.S. was "a free and open society; [...] and historically opposed to [...] secret proceedings," he reminded the press that while it was not a time of open warfare, the danger was even greater as the American way of life was under attack.³⁴⁹ At the end of his speech there was moderate applause.³⁵⁰ In contrast to his prior remarks, this appeal was not received well by the media. His speech backfired as most of "the press refused to accept his attempt to scapegoat and censor them."³⁵¹ *The New York Times* stated that "newspaper publishers and executives reacted cautiously [...] to President Kennedy's appeal for self-regulation by the press."³⁵² Nick B. Williams, the *Los Angeles Times* editor, commented: "By all means let us have the secrecy that is essential to the nation's security. But let us not, at the same time, try to foist upon the press the blame for high-level government blabbering."³⁵³ Not only the press repulsed Kennedy's request of self-censorship but also Arthur Schlesinger, Special Assistant to Kennedy. He later argued that Kennedy's speech had gone "much too far."³⁵⁴

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 05:19-19:28.

³⁴⁷ John F. Kennedy, "Address 'The President and the Press' Before the American Newspaper Publishers Association, New York City | April 27, 1961."

³⁴⁸ Heyse and Gibson, "John F. Kennedy, 'The President and the Press,' Bureau of Advertising, American Newspaper Publishers Association, 27 April 1961": 30.

³⁴⁹ John F. Kennedy, "Address 'The President and the Press' Before the American Newspaper Publishers Association, New York City | April 27, 1961."

³⁵⁰ Address, 'The President and the Press,' Before The American Newspaper Publishers Association, April 27, 1961 | Audio, 19:28-19:34.

³⁵¹ Heyse and Gibson, "John F. Kennedy, 'The President and the Press,' Bureau of Advertising, American Newspaper Publishers Association, 27 April 1961": 23.

³⁵² "Press Is Cautious on Kennedy Plea: Voluntary News Curbs Are Stressed by Ferre," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1961, 14.

³⁵³ Nick B. Williams, "Responsibility of the Press," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1961, C4.

³⁵⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, JR., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York, NY: Mariner Books, 2002), 296.

But why did Kennedy hold this speech after so far successfully having managed the media reporting? As the president was angry with the reports on the crisis, Salinger suggested to Kennedy to speak about the topic at the *ANPA* in order to initiate a discussion on the issue of freedom of information versus national security. While the press secretary later felt that “[he] had given JFK bad advice,” he believed the timing of the speech had been the problem, not its content.³⁵⁵

According to Benson, the press knew before the *ANPA* speech about Kennedy’s opinion on press restraint at the latest from the off-the-record backgrounder. The difference though was with the *ANPA* speech, the president did not address the media in a dialogue setting (as during the backgrounder) but went “over their heads to” the public. The speech put the press in the position to have to answer Kennedy’s statements. Thereby the president forced the press to react, as Benson rightly states.³⁵⁶ The reaction by the media showed that answering Kennedy is exactly what they did, yet differently than the president hoped or expected.

Kennedy in general did have a point concerning the dilemma of a free press and national security issues and even most of the press acknowledged this.³⁵⁷ Moreover, not all parts of the speech were directed solely at the press. The president also repeatedly referred in his speech to the government's obligations regarding the freedom of the press:

No official of my Administration, whether his rank is high or low, civilian or military, should interpret my words here tonight as an excuse to censor the news, to stifle dissent, to cover up our mistakes or to withhold from the press and the public the facts they deserve to know. [...] No President should fear public scrutiny of his program. For from that scrutiny comes understanding; and from that understanding comes support or opposition. And both are necessary. [...] And it means, finally, that government at all levels, must meet its obligation to provide you with the fullest possible information outside the narrowest limits of national security – and we intend to do it.³⁵⁸

Yet, these parts paled in comparison to the ones where he strongly voiced his opinion on the press. Being faced with such open and public criticism, the media had no other choice than to respond to Kennedy’s statements as they did. After all, they saw themselves as the fourth estate, monitoring government and wished the public to see them as such as well.

³⁵⁵ Salinger, *With Kennedy*, 204, 206.

³⁵⁶ Benson, *Writing JFK*, 49–50.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

³⁵⁸ John F. Kennedy, “Address ‘The President and the Press’ Before the American Newspaper Publishers Association, New York City | April 27, 1961.”

Furthermore, the timing for bringing up limitations on the freedom of the press was extremely unfavorable. The press had in its reporting acknowledged that the president had learned from the failure and had assumed responsibility. This was quite favorable reporting for a foreign policy fiasco. That Kennedy – after receiving such favorable coverage – now proposed to limit the freedom of the press and publicly tried to partially blame the media for the failure, not only ran counter to their prior reporting but was in general not going to be received well.³⁵⁹

Kennedy's next press conference was about one week after the *ANPA* speech on May 5. The press corps did not ask many questions on Cuba during this press conference and the focus of these questions was on the future situation of Cuba.³⁶⁰ However, with a question about a NASA operation – on the surface not connected to Cuba –, one correspondent seemed to make a reference to the disagreement between the president and the press. The correspondent asked:

Mr. President [...] were you satisfied with the coverage given today of the space shot, and if you were, and it was not a successful thing, would we be back in the orphanage?³⁶¹

The correspondent was referencing Kennedy's displeasure with the media coverage of the Bay of Pigs invasion and picked up the president's "victory has 100 fathers and defeat is an orphan" line of the April 21 press conference.³⁶² Kennedy in his answer also related to the issue of limiting the press:

So I think everybody ought to understand that we are not going to do what the Russians did, of being secret and just hailing our successes. If they like that system, they have to take it all, which means that you don't get anything in the paper except what the government wants. [...] What is fair is that we all recognize that our failures are going to be publicized and so are our successes and there isn't anything that anyone can do about it or should.³⁶³

In contrast to his statements a week prior, the president this time adopted a more conciliatory approach, in particular with the last sentence.

The analysis shows that the general atmosphere at the press conferences was civil and the interactions polite, even in times of crisis and disagreement. The president would call on many reporters and go through their questions. What became obvious was Kennedy's

³⁵⁹ Benson, *Writing JFK*, 66.

³⁶⁰ "The President's News Conference | May 05, 1961," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-212> (accessed June 10, 2022).

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² "The President's News Conference | April 21, 1961."

³⁶³ "The President's News Conference | May 05, 1961."

unease during his press conference on April 21. Although the media was very cautious to ask the president in public about the crisis and largely respect the president's wish to stay away from the Cuban topic, one might argue that Kennedy was quite defensive, refusing to go into further detail on the few very cautiously asked questions on Cuba. The April 21 press conference was Kennedy's tenth in his third month in office and the Bay of Pigs his first major crisis. Therefore, Kennedy still had to grow into the role of the president, in particular during trying times.

It also became clear that as long as the president did not involve the media in the failure of the invasion, they supported the president and were willing to go along with the themes proposed by Kennedy. Yet, as soon as the president directly and publicly tried to implicate the press in the failure and made them partially responsible for the failure, the media swiftly turned against the president, showing that they would not follow the president's argument all the way.

The Bay of Pigs and its aftermath shows that even a president who generally had very good relations with the media and had managed the crisis situation quite well, can under pressure quickly cause disruption with just one speech. However, Kennedy had learned from the clash, as a later crisis covered in the next section proves.

4.3 Television During the Cuban Missile Crisis

As seen in Chapter IV.3, Kennedy was a master in using television, a medium he actively decided to use to his advantage during the Cuban Missile Crisis. His address on the installation of missiles on Cuba on October 22, 1962 is arguably the most remembered address to the nation of his presidency.³⁶⁴ But first, it is essential to take a few steps back and look at the process that led to the famous speech. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had stated in an ExComm meeting on October 18:

How does [...] the introduction of these weapons to Cuba change the military equation, the military position of the U.S. versus the U.S.S.R.?

And, speaking strictly in military terms, really in terms of weapons, it doesn't change it at all, in my personal opinion. [...] because it is not a military problem that we're facing. It's a political problem. It's a problem of holding the alliance together. It's a problem of properly conditioning Khrushchev for our future moves. And [...] the problem of dealing with our

³⁶⁴ Other forums as a press conference after the immediate crisis as well as remarks of the president to the press several months after the crisis are included in the analysis to gain further insight.

domestic public, all requires action that, in my opinion, the shift in military balance does not require.³⁶⁵

This is a very telling statement, as it shows that some members of the ExComm considered the military aspect of the situation to be negligible as there was no actual change in the global military balance of power. Thus, for them the situation was not a military problem but a political one. McNamara's statement further emphasizes that compared to what a military power shift would have demanded, the political problem required a different response. It was crucial to maintain U.S. credibility as a reliable partner of the Allies but also as a strong adversary to the communist world. They did not want to trigger World War III, but the U.S. wanted to be perceived by both, its allies and the Soviet Union, as fully committed.

In order not to be immediately under the pressure to act, Kennedy and his team tried to keep their knowledge of the missiles secret. To do so, the president kept his normal schedule. On October 18, he met with Andrei Gromyko, the foreign minister of the Soviet Union, pretending to be unaware of the weapons. Similarly, the following day, he flew to Chicago as planned and when a day later he came back from Chicago prematurely, he attempted to conceal the true reason for returning early "by telling the media that he was not feeling well."³⁶⁶ In a meeting of the National Security Council on October 20, the advisors suggested several responses to the stationing of missiles they had worked on in the past few days. The alternatives presented were a blockade or air strikes. Various combinations of the alternatives and their potential consequences were discussed. In the end, the president decided on a blockade, yet preparation for an air strike should be taken as well.³⁶⁷

"News leaks and inquiries [...] were a growing problem" when the administration took these preparatory steps (e.g., moving troops or summoning members of Congress) as these actions captured the attention of the media. According to Sorensen, "publishers were asked not to disclose anything without checking" and "direct questions of other reporters were avoided, evaded or answered incorrectly by officials who did not know the correct answers; and a few outright falsehoods were told to keep our knowledge from the Communists."³⁶⁸

³⁶⁵ Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, eds., *John F. Kennedy: The Great Crisis, September - October 21, 1962*, The Presidential Recordings 2 (New York, NY: Norton & Company, 2001), 528.

³⁶⁶ Collier Hillstrom, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 44–46.

³⁶⁷ Minutes of the 505th National Security Council Meeting on Saturday, October 20, 1962, National Security Council Meetings, 1962: No. 505, 20 October 1962, Box 313, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda, JFKL.

³⁶⁸ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 697–98.

Moreover, when on Sunday, October 21, the administration found out that media outlets had gotten information on the crisis and were about to publish it, Kennedy himself contacted the editors to urge them not to publish their stories in the interest of national security. They went along.³⁶⁹

Furthermore, an unattributable handwritten note from a conference or cabinet meeting made on the day of Kennedy's address reads, "Is there a plan to brief and brain wash key press within 12 hours or so?" It also lists several media and media representatives as bullet points: *The New York Times*, Walter Lippmann, Marquis Childs, Joseph Alsop and generally "key bureau chiefs."³⁷⁰ This shows the importance the administration ascribed to the media reports on the crisis and the focus on managing the news during it. In particular the wording of "brain wash" is quite aggressive and intervening.

Yet not only the media needed to be managed. Another priority for the Kennedy administration was to gain the upper hand in the global battle for public opinion. The president felt that public criticism of the government and its actions would not help to address the current political issues. The response to the missiles thus also needed an element that would lead to support of the government's actions by the public. Kennedy decided to draw on one of the strongest emotions people have: fear. And television would be the means of evoking that emotion in the public. In the evening of October 22, 1962, President Kennedy finally informed the American public and at the same time people all over the world on the fact that the Soviet Union had begun to station missiles on Cuba in an 18-minute-long and frightening speech that was nationally broadcast via radio and television.³⁷¹ Shortly before, the administration had informed Khrushchev and key allies of the planned blockade via a letter and copy of the address.³⁷²

In the speech, Kennedy told the public about the deployment of two types of missiles on Cuba. One type of missile could reach Washington D.C. and any southeastern U.S. cities and the other was capable of reaching nearly all parts of the United States. He continued that "this urgent transformation of Cuba into an important strategic base [...] constitutes an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas." The president further characterized the installation of weapons as "deliberately provocative and unjustified" and

³⁶⁹ Collier Hillstrom, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 46.

³⁷⁰ Note Made During the Day on Media Reporting, October 22, 1962, Cuba: Conference Notes and Doodles, 1962: October-December, Box 115, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, President's Office Files, Countries, JFKL.

³⁷¹ John F. Kennedy, "President Kennedy's Cuban Missile Crisis Oval Office Address | October 22, 1962 | Video," *C-SPAN.org*, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?308689-1/president-kennedys-cuban-missile-crisis-oval-office-address> (accessed November 20, 2022), 00:35-18:27.

³⁷² Collier Hillstrom, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 47.

stated that the U.S. “will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war [...] – but neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced.”³⁷³ Kennedy then reported on his actions, among them the quarantine installation and expanded surveillance. He also called on Khrushchev to remove the weapons and stated that any attack from Cuba would be seen “as an attack by the Soviet Union [...], requiring a full retaliatory response.”³⁷⁴ Kennedy emphasized that the U.S. “have no wish to war with the Soviet Union,” however any aggression (the latest or further) “will be met with determination[...] [and] by whatever action is needed.”³⁷⁵

The president also addressed Americans directly, acknowledging the dangerous times, warning them of “months of sacrifice,” but arguing that “the greatest danger of all would be to do nothing.”³⁷⁶ Kennedy ended his speech with:

The cost of freedom is always high – but Americans have always paid it. And one path we shall never choose, and that is the path of surrender or submission.

Our goal is not the victory of might, but the vindication of right – not peace at the expense of freedom, but both peace and freedom, here in this hemisphere, and, we hope, around the world.³⁷⁷

In the available video of the address, one can see a president with a serious look, presenting the findings to the American public. Kennedy’s voice is firm and clear, and he frequently looks up from his speech notes to the camera. His words come across as forceful and fierce.³⁷⁸ Throughout his speech, Kennedy reiterated numerous times that the weapons were “offensive” in nature and portrayed the Soviet Union as the only party displaying aggressive behavior.³⁷⁹

According to Michael Beschloss, “the address was probably the most alarming ever delivered by an American President.” Beschloss further compared Kennedy’s address to President Roosevelt’s after the attack on Pearl Harbor:

Although it echoed Franklin Roosevelt’s Pearl Harbor message in language and meter, Roosevelt’s speech had been intended to calm the American people, Kennedy’s to frighten

³⁷³ John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba | October 22, 1962,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-and-television-report-the-american-people-the-soviet-arms-buildup-cuba> (accessed July 14, 2022).

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ John F. Kennedy, “President Kennedy’s Cuban Missile Crisis Oval Office Address | October 22, 1962 | Video,” 00:35-18:27.

³⁷⁹ John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba | October 22, 1962.”

them. Roosevelt's message was written to reassure Americans that the war would be won. Even without it, Pearl Harbor had already united the country behind the war effort. Kennedy knew that the missiles in Cuba were not open to such unambiguous interpretation as the attack on Hawaii.³⁸⁰

And Kennedy's strategy worked. With a viewership of about 100 million people, Kennedy's address had a larger audience than any presidential address before that.³⁸¹ Decades later, people still remembered vividly how alarmed and frightened they felt during and after Kennedy's address. One eyewitness – at the time of the address eleven years old – stated:

I can still remember watching the president on TV and being so scared that I had cold chills. I had dreams for years of looking up in the sky and seeing it filled with planes. It is one of my most vivid childhood memories!³⁸²

Back then also only eleven years old, Peter Russert, explained that he “was more mystified than anything that someone could just appear on the television and announce, in so many words, that the world could end in a matter of days or hours.”³⁸³ And Debbie Duncan described her experience of the speech as a little girl as follows:

I was alarmed when Mom clicked on the car radio [...] just before 4:00 the afternoon of Monday, October 22, 1962, [...]
My heart quickened as President Kennedy scared me with [...] [his address].
We sat in our driveway as Kennedy concluded with, ‘Thank you and good night.’
I felt glued to the front seat, too shaken to get out of the car and open the garage door.
[...]
Kennedy also ordered the Soviets to dismantle the nuclear missile sites the U.S. knew were there. If they didn't, there would be consequences.
Gulp.³⁸⁴

Americans not only privately feared a potential World War III after the speech but also wrote to the president about their feelings, even children. One letter to Kennedy, written by an eight-year-old child on October 26, 1962, read:

³⁸⁰ Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev 1960-1963* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1991), 485.

³⁸¹ Collier Hillstrom, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 46.

³⁸² “Missile Crisis: Your Memories,” *BBC News*, October 29, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2317931.stm> (accessed July 29, 2022).

³⁸³ Peter Russert, “A Hidden Narrative of the '60's,” *Humanthology*, September 15, 2014, <http://www.humanthology.com/cuban-missile-crisis/2014/9/15/a-hidden-narrative-of-the-60s> (accessed July 29, 2022).

³⁸⁴ Debbie Duncan, “When a Writer Doesn't Need a License: The Scary Reality of October 1962,” *Humanthology*, September 15, 2014, <http://www.humanthology.com/cuban-missile-crisis/2014/9/15/when-a-writer-doesnt-need-a-license-the-scary-reality-of-october-1962> (accessed July 29, 2022). Duncan heard the speech on the West Coast, thus the different time of day.

Dear President Kennedy,

Hello! [sic!] my name is Linda Feinberg, I am 8 years old [...].

Please try to influence the Cuba about the war. We have a shelter in the cellar of my house.

My brother and sister are so nervous that I don't know what to do. I don't want a war to begin because I don't want to get killed. Thank you for what you are doing for us.

Sincerely,

Linda Feinberg³⁸⁵

The effect Kennedy's speech had on people listening to or watching it becomes very clear through these statements. The atmosphere and content were so intense that it got engrained into children's memories and they vividly remember where they had been and how they felt even more than half a century later. All those reactions show the alarming effect the crisis had on people's lives and how scared they were of the prospect of nuclear war. With the address the White House had achieved its goal of getting the American public through fear behind their plan of action. A poll conducted shortly after the address found that 84 percent of the public approved of the blockade.³⁸⁶

After the speech was broadcast, the administration was concerned with the reporting of the media. On October 24, the White House sent a memorandum to editors and news directors with directives on how to handle information on the Cuban Missile Crisis they might acquire:

The following information is considered vital to our national security and therefore will not be released by the Department of Defense. Despite this fact, it is possible that such information may come into the possession of news media. During the current tense international situation, the White House feels that the publication of such information is contrary to the public interest. We ask public information media of all types to exercise caution and discretion in the publication of such information.³⁸⁷

This was followed by a list of twelve specific points when the news media should not publish information, which included for instance:

1) Any discussion of plans for employment of strategic or tactical forces of the United States including types of equipment and new or planned location of command or control centers or detection systems.

[...]

³⁸⁵ Letter to President Kennedy by Linda Feinberg, October 26, 1962, Feinberg, L-Z, Box 837, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, White House Central Name File, Name File, 1961-1963, JFKL.

³⁸⁶ Lydia Saad, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: 40 Years Later," *Gallup*, October 14, 2002, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/6979/cuban-missile-crisis-years-later.aspx> (accessed February 22, 2023). The poll was taken on October 22, 1962.

³⁸⁷ Memorandum to Editors and Radio and Television News Directors, October 24, 1962, John F. Kennedy: 1962 and Cuban Missile Crisis, Box 35, Chalmers M. Roberts Personal Papers, Subject Files, JFKL.

6) Degree of alert of military forces.

[...]

9) Official estimates of vulnerability to various forms of enemy action, including sabotage, of United States Armed Forces and installations.³⁸⁸

In case editors were unsure about handling of information, they should consult with the Department of Defense. However, the advice by the department would “be on an advisory basis and not considered finally binding on the editor(s).”³⁸⁹

But the administration could not fully prevent unfavorable reporting by the media. On October 25, prominent and influential syndicated columnist Walter Lippmann, who was explicitly mentioned in the note of October 22 on whether there was a plan to “brain wash” key media members, weighed in on the crisis. Unfortunately for the administration, not as they wished. In his column, Lippmann criticized Kennedy for neglecting diplomacy by not mentioning his knowledge of the missiles in his meeting with the Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union Gromyko on October 18. He further argued that Kennedy’s decision was not one of a wise leader:

This was to suspend diplomacy. [...] This would have made it more likely that Moscow would order the ships not to push on to Cuba. But if such diplomatic action did not change the orders, [...] the President's public speech would have been stronger. For it would not have been subject to the criticism that a great power had issued an ultimatum to another great power without first attempting to negotiate the issue. By confronting Mr. Gromyko privately, the President would have given Mr. Khrushchev [sic!] what all wise statesmen give their adversaries – the chance to save face.³⁹⁰

Lippmann not only criticized the president but also proposed the removal of the American missiles in Turkey in exchange for the removal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba as “the two bases could be dismantled without altering the world balance of power.”³⁹¹ This public proposal put the White House on the spot, because Lippmann was right that a missile exchange made no difference to the military power structure. McNamara had already concluded on October 18 that the introduction of missiles in Cuba did not alter the power balance. But in his address, Kennedy had portrayed the Soviet Union as the sole aggressor who endangered world peace by stationing “offensive” weapons “outside its own territory.”³⁹² Yet, the U.S. had stationed American missiles in Turkey, thus outside its

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Walter Lippmann, “Blockade Proclaimed,” *New York Herald Tribune*, October 25, 1962.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba | October 22, 1962.”

territory, a few years earlier. Kennedy had even unintentionally admitted the danger of their own action in one of the ExComm meetings by stating: “It’s just as if we suddenly began to put a major number of MRBMs in Turkey. Now that’d be goddamn dangerous.” When advisors reminded the president that this was exactly what the U.S. had done, Kennedy said, “that was five years ago” and “during a different period.”³⁹³ Even though Kennedy argued that it was a different time now, his statement emphasizes why Lippman’s proposal was problematic. An exchange of weapons would demonstrate to the public that the weapons were equivalent and would undercut the self-proclaimed “defensiveness” of American weapons. This would thus publicly weaken the assertion that the Soviet weapons were “offensive” in nature. Moreover, as the U.S. had stationed weapons outside their borders first, it undermined the narrative that the Soviet Union was the sole aggressor. Overall, it would challenge Kennedy’s public argumentation, his credibility, and his trustworthiness.

To the ExComm members’ indignation, the Soviet leader started to request this exact deal in his second letter to Kennedy just two days after the article had appeared in print (see Section IV.4.1), making the ExComm wonder on October 27:

You see, I think they've been put up by the Lippmann piece. [...] He's now gotten on the idea that he can get a lot more. His proposal is that whatever you want out of Cuba, you take out of Turkey. [...]

Well, he [Khrushchev] made the Turkey-Cuba trade [proposal] right after Lippmann did.³⁹⁴ Indeed, this was in the end the deal the U.S. would propose to the Soviet Union, though only secretly as it otherwise would tarnish Kennedy’s and the U.S.’ credibility. Officially, the Soviets would dismantle the missiles in Cuba in exchange for lifting the quarantine and a guarantee by the Americans not to invade Cuba.³⁹⁵

Since the official deal looked like a full win for the U.S., it was very advantageous for the USA and the president. But Kennedy was aware of the unfavorable look of the official deal for the Soviet leader. When some of his advisors proposed going on television celebrating the victory, he rejected arguing: “Khrushchev has eaten enough crow.”³⁹⁶ He did not want

³⁹³ Naftali and Zelikow, *John F. Kennedy: The Great Crisis, September - October 21, 1962*, 451. MRBM stands for Medium-Range Ballistic Missile.

³⁹⁴ Philip Zelikow and Ernest May, eds., *John F. Kennedy: The Great Crisis, October 22-28, 1962*, The Presidential Recordings 3 (New York, NY: Norton & Company, 2001), 470-472, 478.

³⁹⁵ Collier Hillstrom, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, 64–67.

³⁹⁶ “War and Peace in the Nuclear Age; Europe Goes Nuclear; Interview with David Powers, 1986 | February 28, 1986 | Video,” *GBH Archives*, https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_8946E771A345459DA076BD20131B96CB#at_2158.193_s (accessed November 20, 2022), 37:55-38:18.

to make it more difficult for Khrushchev to defend the deal and fan the flames of Soviet officials disagreeing with Khrushchev's decision. This attitude was also forwarded to the press, asking them off-the-records to refrain from gloating or words as "capitulation." Most of the media followed this request.³⁹⁷

Yet, the White House could not fully resist portraying their view of the crisis. An article in *The Saturday Evening Post*, which appeared in December 1962, again clearly shows the cooperation between media representatives and the president. The two authors, Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, described how the president and the ExComm handled the crisis but only portrayed the official U.S. version of the events. Interestingly, there was one mentioning of the idea of dismantling American missiles in Europe in exchange for the ones in Cuba, however it was attributed in a depreciating manner to the United States Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson, who "dissented from the Ex-Comm consensus." Overall, there was no outright glorious depiction of an American victory, but the Soviet leader was frequently described as having "blinked" in a starring contest, and the American actions were portrayed in a very positive light.³⁹⁸ The article showed how trusting the media was of presidential accounts. Moreover, most of the authors information for the article also came directly from the White House. Today it is known that Kennedy even revised a draft of the article himself.³⁹⁹

On November 2, 1962, Kennedy informed the public through an about two-minute-long address on the progress of the dismantling of the weapons in Cuba, which was broadcast via radio and television. In his remarks, the president further stated that the government would continue to monitor the dismantling and keep the quarantine in place "until the threat to peace posed by these offensive weapons is gone." In contrast to the tense setting of the first address, which took place in the Oval Office with the president sitting at his desk, this time, the president stood behind a podium and the address was delivered from the Fish Room of the White House.⁴⁰⁰ This reflected the fact that the immediate crisis had passed

³⁹⁷ Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1966), 205; Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 542.

³⁹⁸ Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, "In Time of Crisis," *The Saturday Evening Post* (December 8, 1962), 16–20.

³⁹⁹ Gregg Herken, *The Georgetown Set: Friends and Rivals in Cold War Washington* (Westminster: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014), 277, 279.

⁴⁰⁰ John F. Kennedy, "Radio and Television Remarks on the Dismantling of Soviet Missile Bases in Cuba | November 02, 1962"; John F. Kennedy, "November 2, 1962 - President Kennedy's Remarks on the Dismantling of Soviet Missile Bases in Cuba | Video," *HelmerReenberg YouTube Channel*, March 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCqm3b5N4Vg> (accessed November 20, 2022), 00:00-1:50.

and the speech was not intended to stir up fears, but to reassure the population and show that the government was monitoring progress on the dismantling of the weapons.

What becomes clear from the analysis is that there was a high value Kennedy and his advisors ascribed to media reports on the crisis and that they tried to manage the media's reporting of the ongoing situation. As the media found out information, Kennedy asked them to withhold their reports, which they did. This cooperation between the White House and the media in this situation was of enormous benefit to the Kennedy administration. It allowed the president to announce the American response in a nationally televised speech to the public and fully exploit the possibilities of the medium television. By that he was able to get the support of the American public through his fear evoking rhetoric behind his actions. His address would not have been as alarming and frightening, had the media reported on a potential crisis beforehand. It thus becomes apparent that although Kennedy used television to circumvent the media and create a state of alarm, he could not have done so without the cooperation of the media. Therefore, the president was still highly dependent on good relations with them, even if he wanted to circumvent the press.

With the memorandum to editors and news directors, the White House gave further directives on how the media – in their opinion – should best handle certain information after the address. This seems to resemble the call for self-censorship of the Bay of Pigs crisis. Yet not only did it not come personally from the president, but also the public blame that Kennedy had ascribed to the media after the Bay of Pigs fiasco was missing here.

After the Cuban Missiles Crisis, the White House stayed unapologetic on their secrecy. During a news conference on November 20, the president updated the press and the public on the development of the situation in Cuba with a long opening statement. Subsequently, most questions of the correspondents were on Cuba.⁴⁰¹

Two of them were very interesting. One of the correspondents asked Kennedy for his views on the criticism to keep information secret while the crisis had happened and the critique that this kept journalists from doing their jobs. Kennedy was not apologetic in his answer and stated that information was purposefully “kept in the highest levels of Government [sic!]” to not disclose the acquired information before the administration had decided on a policy and conferred with its allies. Kennedy argued that it would have been a catastrophe

⁴⁰¹ “The President's News Conference | November 20, 1962,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-170> (accessed November 22, 2022).

had the information been published and “for those very good reasons” it was kept secret. Moreover, he directly told correspondents that he had “no apologies for that.”⁴⁰² Another correspondent asked about the information flow to the press from the State Department, referring to the memorandum of October 24, stating that “officers and others [...] are reluctant to have any contacts with newspapermen” also in other areas than indicated in the memorandum.⁴⁰³ The president replied with a more conciliatory answer, arguing for the free flow of information in areas not connected to national security and offering to initiate talks on the issue:

And in those areas which are not involved there, I would be delighted to talk to Mr. Sylvester [Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs] and with representatives of the press and see if we can get this straightened out so that there is a free flow of news to which the press is entitled, and which I think ought to be in the press, and on which any administration really must depend as a check to its own actions.

So I can assure you that our only interest has been, first, during this period of crisis and over a longer period to try to – not to have coming out of the Pentagon information which is highly sensitive, particularly in the intelligence areas, which I can assure you in my own not too distant experience has been extremely inimical to the interests of the United States. Now that is our only interest.

Beyond that, I think it ought to pour out.⁴⁰⁴

In contrast to his Bay of Pigs press conference, where Kennedy seemed uneasy and uncomfortable, here the president looked confident while answering the question with his typical decisiveness as the prior answer showed. Moreover, he frequently joked during the press conference, making correspondents laugh.⁴⁰⁵

Several months later, at the end of his remarks at the convention of the *Magazine Publishers Association* in March 1963, the president was again asked about the news management of the administration during the Cuban Missiles Crisis. Kennedy replied with the same sentiment as mentioned earlier, admitting that they had “managed the news in this period,” for example when pretending to have a cold or when “Pentagon officials said

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ “President John F. Kennedy's 45th News Conference - November 20, 1962 | Video,” *HelmerReenberg YouTube Channel*, November 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7dB0AkhvgM> (accessed November 22, 2022).

there were no offensive weapons in Cuba. They didn't know that there were. It was rather closely held.”⁴⁰⁶

The president also acknowledged that they managed the news after his address and “of the blockade from the Executive Committee for a very good reason, because we were not sure what the Soviets response would be, [...] so we tried to control information the second week.”⁴⁰⁷

Overall, Kennedy was non-apologetic about keeping information secret during the crisis, arguing that it needed to be done to insure a successful resolution of the crisis. Yet, his answer did not result in a direct negative reaction at the convention as at the end of his answer, he joked: “I think, obviously, we try to make the Administration look good and a good many try to make it look bad and I think it has been fairly much of a draw.” This caused the attendees to laugh and applaud.⁴⁰⁸

Overall, the national security argument for censorship Kennedy brought forth after the Cuban Missile Crisis appears similar to the one he gave to the media after the Bay of Pigs invasion. The note written on October 22, the answer during the press conference, and his answer at the *Magazine Publishers Association* convention show that the mindset of the administration had not changed since the Bay of Pigs. However, the administration had learned two main lessons. First, when they asked the media for self-censorship, they did so more carefully and – importantly – not publicly, thus avoiding the backlash of the Bay of Pigs. Second, instead of only asking the media for self-censorship, Kennedy decided to actively withhold information by keeping the information limited to a small group of people or limiting the exposure of staff to the media. By that, the White House managed the media's reporting and could achieve full use of the medium television.

Concerning the public, Kennedy did successfully resolve the crisis. Managing the news in his own favor surely contributed to how the public perceived his handling of the crisis. *Gallup* tracks the approval rating of presidents over the course of their presidency. In Kennedy's approval ratings graph, one can see a steep increase from about 60 to about 75

⁴⁰⁶ Transcript of Remarks of the President to Members Attending Magazine Publishers Association Convention Statler-Hilton Hotel, Washington D.C., March 26, 1963, Subjects: Presidential off-record to Magazine Publishers Association, 26 March 1963, Box 165, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, White House Staff Files of Pierre Salinger, Classified Background Briefing Material, 1961-1964, JFKL.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

percent when the Cuban Missile Crisis had been resolved successfully.⁴⁰⁹ Contemporary witnesses would talk about the former president and the Cuban Missile Crisis as follows:

I was a young married woman with three small children. I was terrified, especially for my family. [...] President Kennedy held back the chicken hawks who wanted war and through his diplomacy we were spared. If only we had President Kennedy now.⁴¹⁰

My parents were stockpiling food and my grandfather was digging a bomb shelter. We expected the world to blow up and became Kennedy worshippers when it didn't.⁴¹¹

The 13-day Cuban Missile Crisis confronted us with the very real possibility of a nuclear war. It was only the wisdom and patience of U.S. President John F. Kennedy that served to avoid the 'megadeaths.' He rejected the hawkish counsel of his advisors, including brother Bobby Kennedy, to escalate the confrontation beyond his arms blockade – as we now know from White House tape recordings. [...]

But we should always remember what happened 50 years ago – as a sobering reminder of how easily humankind can stumble into apocalypse, if there are not wise leaders to stop at the brink.⁴¹²

There are several differences to the Bay of Pigs crisis, which made the Cuban Missile Crisis a win for Kennedy, first and foremost, how the situation turned out. Whereas the Bay of Pigs was a clear failure for the U.S., the Missile Crisis was – at least publicly – resolved to the advantage of the U.S. Moreover, the Bay of Pigs was self-inflicted by the U.S. being the aggressor, and then botching its mission. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet Union was painted as the aggressor. It should be noted though, that during Cold War times depicting culprits is not as clear-cut since actions of one side are based on actions of the other side. But at least for the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, the culprits were seen that way by the majority in the U.S. Second, the Kennedy administration had learned from its mistakes during the Bay of Pigs and handled the media and the information flow to the media to their advantage. And third, through more experience, Kennedy was much more comfortable in his role as president. This made him handle the media during times of crisis more proficiently, but with an unapologetic stance on his management of information flow.

⁴⁰⁹ “Presidential Approval Ratings: Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends,” *Gallup*, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx> (accessed August 23, 2022). There are no exact percentages indicated at this graph.

⁴¹⁰ “Missile Crisis: Your Memories.”

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹² Raymond Heard, “My Memories of the Cuban Missile Crisis, 50 Years Later,” *The Huffington Post*, October 8, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/archive/ca/entry/cuban-missile-crisis_b_1947017 (accessed July 29, 2022).

The analysis of Kennedy's media communication shows that he in general had a great understanding of the media, which he used to further his good relations. This was helped by the president's ability to pour oil on troubled water and reinstate his favorable relationship after disagreements: He had learned from the backlash of the Bay of Pigs and had gained back the cooperation of the media before the Cuban Missile Crisis. Moreover, the president was generally accessible to the media and polite in his interactions with them. Yet, it cannot be ignored that the president-media relationship during his time in office was much more cooperative and friendly in comparison with today, making it easier for Kennedy to convince the media of self-censorship during times of crisis or to keep his state of health concealed.

At the same time, Kennedy masterfully used the medium television and maximized its utility for his presidency. This helped him throughout his presidency, but in particular during times of crisis. Although he still had to manage the media's reporting before and after his televised address to the nation during the Cuban Missile Crisis, it allowed him to directly reach Americans and get their support for his course of action, setting the tone for the further course of the crisis.

In hindsight, the most remarkable idea were the live televised press conferences. There was a telegenic president who displayed his rhetorical competence and knowledge of facts and used his wit as an appeal generating but also disarming tool. Kennedy not only made the press conferences into valuable events for the media through their high frequency and his candid answers, but he also managed to portray himself as a decisive leader to the public. Thus, the press conferences allowed Kennedy to circumvent the media while interacting with them, which turned them into a brilliant communications forum.

V. Richard M. Nixon

I. Richard M. Nixon and the Media

Born on January 9, 1913, in Yorba Linda, California, Richard Milhous Nixon grew up in a middle-class family. After high school, he studied at Whittier College and then went on to Duke Law School. After graduating in 1937, he started to work in Whittier as a lawyer. At that time, Nixon met Thelma Catherine “Pat” Ryan whom he married in 1940. The couple had two daughters. During World War II, Richard Nixon served in the military in the South Pacific and after the war had ended left the navy as lieutenant commander.⁴¹³

In 1946, Nixon came to politics through a group of Whittier’s Republicans resenting Democratic policies like the New Deal. They wished to replace Democratic Congressman Jerry Voorhis. Nixon appeared to them to be the person to do so. Already during this campaign Nixon’s political style became visible: he used smear tactics and – knowing it to be false – successfully linked Voorhis to communism and won the election.⁴¹⁴ His campaign had shown Nixon’s attitude that ultimately would end his presidency: “Politics is a game where anything goes and everyone breaks the rules.”⁴¹⁵ When he ran for senate in 1950, he – as during his first political campaign – linked his democratic opponent to communism. Nixon won the race with a large margin, earning the nickname “Tricky Dick” for his tactics.⁴¹⁶ Just two years later, Republican presidential candidate Dwight Eisenhower selected Nixon to be his vice-presidential running mate. This was the campaign in which he gave his famous Checker’s speech (see V.3). As vice president, Nixon was more visible than common for this position. One reason was that he increased his standing through international trips.⁴¹⁷

In 1960, it was easy for Nixon to become the Republican presidential candidate, but he lost in a close race in the general election to John F. Kennedy (see IV.3 and V.3).⁴¹⁸ After Nixon had also lost his bid for Governor of California in 1962, many – and presumably Nixon himself – thought his political career to be over. However, Nixon’s goodbye did not last long as he again sought, and this time won the presidency in 1968. Together with his

⁴¹³ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 315–16.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁴¹⁵ James T. Hamilton, “Attacks on the Press Have Helped Bring down a President Before,” *Washington Monthly*, January 12, 2017, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2017/01/12/nixon-and-trump-past-as-prologue/> (accessed April 29, 2020).

⁴¹⁶ Kathryn Moore, *The American President: Detailed Biographies, Historical Timelines - from George Washington to Donald Trump* (New York, NY: Sterling Publishing, 2018), 485.

⁴¹⁷ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 316–17.

⁴¹⁸ During one of the trips he famously clashed with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in what became known as the Kitchen Debate. See Chapter V.3 for further analysis.

running mate Spiro Agnew, the Governor of Maryland, Nixon successfully ran a campaign mainly for the conservative white middle-class (the “silent majority”), hardly reaching out to any other group.⁴¹⁹

As for his predecessors, the Vietnam War proved to be more difficult to end. Nixon’s strategy – known as Vietnamization – was to slowly transfer the responsibility for all fighting to South Vietnam while American troops were pulled out of Vietnam. During Nixon’s second term, the administration reached a peace agreement. However, the agreement enabled North Vietnam’s troops to stay in South Vietnam, which largely contributed to the later communist victory. One international success for Nixon came in May 1972 when he and the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signed the arms control agreement SALT I (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks). The talks on arms control had started in 1969 and paved the way for later arms reduction treaties.⁴²⁰

Richard Nixon’s presidency has been overshadowed by the Watergate scandal which refers to a break-in into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee on June 17, 1972, and the attempted cover-up by the Nixon administration.⁴²¹ Nixon resigned due to the scandal on August 9, 1974 (see V.4). In the end, it was his personality and in particular his paranoia that had destroyed his presidency. He died on April 22, 1994.⁴²²

Richard Nixon realized early on that the media played a crucial role for politicians. According to Stephen Hess, this realization “was more profound for its time that it appears to be” as most politicians back then thought of the press as a passive information transmitter.⁴²³ Yet, it were some of Nixon’s character traits that mostly influenced his relationship with the media over the course of his political career. Not only was he thin-skinned and took criticism by the media extremely personally, he “could [also] nurse a grudge in Shakespearean fashion.”⁴²⁴ He generally distrusted the media and believed they were always gunning for him. This attitude led, for example, to the disregard he showed towards the correspondents’ time pressures during his 1960 presidential campaign.

⁴¹⁹ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 317–18.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 318–20.

⁴²¹ In the following the Watergate scandal will also be referred to as the Watergate affair or simply Watergate.

⁴²² Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 320–22.

⁴²³ Quoted in Debra G. Hernandez, “Nixon and the Press,” *Editor & Publisher*, 127, no. 26 (1994), 82–91: 83.

⁴²⁴ Randall J. Stephens, “Richard Nixon's Authoritarian Loathing of the Media Lives on in Donald Trump,” *The Conversation*, February 22, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/richard-nixons-authoritarian-loathing-of-the-media-lives-on-in-donald-trump-73323> (accessed April 17, 2020); Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 52.

Reporters often did not have enough time to properly finish their stories before deadlines, and Nixon's campaign did not – as Kennedy's – hand out transcripts of his speeches. Thus, correspondents had to hastily take notes during them. Although the latter was changed later when the campaign realized it was counterproductive not to help correspondents by handing out transcripts, such decisions influenced his relationship with the media negatively.⁴²⁵

A character trait and theme that ran through Nixon's life was not giving up. This trait was already evident in his student years and would influence his political career. Although he was not athletic, he tried out for the college football team every year; each time not being selected and being beaten up so bad that “even his coach winced.”⁴²⁶ Losing the 1960s presidential race and also his 1962 California governor's bid, Nixon denounced the media as being biased and supporting his opponents.⁴²⁷ In those years his belief in a media bias became extremely strong.⁴²⁸ He famously declared at a press conference after his loss in the gubernatorial election that it would be his last one and the media “won't have Nixon to kick around anymore.”⁴²⁹ However, in 1968, he came back and on his second try successfully ran for president.⁴³⁰

To manage the communication and image of President Nixon, the White House Office of Communications was established. One goal of the Office was to reduce the chances of the president spontaneously meeting the media. It rather thoroughly planned Nixon's public appearances. Although today a White House without a communications office is unimaginable, such an institutionalized media management approach was revolutionary back then.⁴³¹ This shows that Nixon knew of the significance of good media coverage. Yet, Nixon's media relationship further deteriorated: “He was at war with the press, bickering

⁴²⁵ Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, 51–52.

⁴²⁶ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 315.

⁴²⁷ Dialynn Dwyer, “Presidents Vs. The Press: What Came Before Trump's ‘Running War’ with the Media”; Susan J. Douglas, “Presidents and the Media,” in *Recapturing the Oval Office*, 155.

⁴²⁸ Hernandez, “Nixon and the Press”: 84.

⁴²⁹ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 317; Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks of Richard Nixon Beverly Hilton | November 7, 1962,” *Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library and Museum (RMNL)*, <https://cdn.nixonlibrary.org/01/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/24093803/1962-Last-Press-Conference.pdf> (accessed November 23, 2022).

⁴³⁰ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 317–18.

⁴³¹ Jon Marshall, “Nixon Is Gone, but His Media Strategy Lives on: Forty Years After Watergate, Presidential Suspicion of Reporters and Attempts to Keep the Press at Arm's Length Remain High,” *The Atlantic*, August 4, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/08/nixons-revenge-his-media-strategy-triumphs-40-years-after-resignation/375274/> (accessed May 8, 2020). See for a detailed description on evolution of the White House communications Chapter III.1.1.

with reporters, plotting against them, and setting in motion the destructive mentality that led to the exposes of Watergate.”⁴³²

This sentiment was confirmed by Nixon who wrote in his memoirs about his thoughts on the media during his presidency. He described the relationship as a constant fight. Nixon recounted that he had “to engage in epic battle” with the media.⁴³³ In a taped conversation of December 14, 1972, Nixon even said: “The press is the enemy. The press is the enemy. [...] They are the enemy, [...] we think they’re the enemy. [...] But the press is the enemy. The press is the enemy.”⁴³⁴ The number of times Nixon repeated the phrase in a short amount of time showed his strong conviction of the press being his enemy. Richard Harris offered a convincing train of thought on why Nixon perceived the press as such a forceful enemy. He stated that as

Nixon’s Administration constantly did things in secret that would have been unacceptable to the public if they had been done in the open, there was always a danger that the press might discover and reveal what was going on. That is, the press was potentially Mr. Nixon’s enemy – far more than the courts or Congress, because only the press could dig out and tell the story (whatever help reporters might get from the courts or Congress) in a way that would arouse the people to demand an accounting. And since the news coverage of Mr. Nixon’s pre-Presidential career had shown him that he was not widely trusted by newsmen, the threat they posed must have seemed to him at times very close to being actual enmity. Then, when the Watergate disclosures actually carried out the threat, the enemy was suddenly at the White House door.⁴³⁵

Nixon’s aversion can also be seen in the way he called his enemy: instead of “the press,” he was the first president to frequently use “the media,” which is “a more ominous sounding term.”⁴³⁶ Back then, the term the press was used much more frequently. The media appeared to be broader and more undefined, therefore more threatening.

Two elements would thus make-up President Nixon’s media strategy: First, circumventing the media – in particular the press corps – by directly addressing Americans through the medium television (see V.3 and V.4.2), and second go after the media publicly and at times illegally. Nixon “denigrate[d] journalists as biased elites” and claimed that they did not report fairly about him. He sent out Spiro Agnew, his vice president from 1969 until 1973,

⁴³² Perloff, *Political Communication: Politics, Press, and Public in America*, 52.

⁴³³ Richard M. Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 850.

⁴³⁴ Douglas Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter, *The Nixon Tapes : 1971-1972* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2014), 703.

⁴³⁵ Richard Harris, “The Presidency and the Press,” *The New Yorker*, September 24, 1973, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1973/10/01/the-presidency-and-the-press> (accessed April 3, 2020).

⁴³⁶ Marshall, “Nixon Is Gone, but His Media Strategy Lives On.”

to attack the media.⁴³⁷ For example in a speech for their commentary after his addresses Agnew stated that “no medium has a more profound influence over public opinion” and further argued that

the President of the United States has a right to communicate directly with the people who elected him, and the people [...] have the right to make up their own minds [...] about a presidential address without having the president’s words and thoughts characterized through the prejudices of hostile critics.⁴³⁸

Agnew accused network commentators, who had criticized Nixon, for having “their minds [...] made up in advance” and argued that “a small group of men [...] settle upon the 20 minutes or so of film and commentary that’s to reach the public.” The vice president took it one step further when asserting that he was “not asking for government censorship” but questioning “whether a form of censorship already exists,” namely through the commentary by the media.⁴³⁹

At the end of his speech, Agnew called on the people to demand objective reporting from the TV networks, and the people did. 150,000 messages reached the networks of which approximately two-thirds agreed with Agnew. The vice president received roughly 74,000 and mostly supportive letters.⁴⁴⁰

Nixon further believed that the media did not approve of him. Harry R. Haldeman, Nixon’s White House Chief of Staff, wrote in his diaries that Nixon’s take on the media was that they “can’t admit they’re wrong,” and as Nixon frequently showed them their errors, they hated him. In 1971, Nixon pointed out that his press secretary had attempted to factually correct the press since 1969 but “had gotten nowhere.” Nixon further noted that “the press aren’t interested in factual accuracy.” Nixon’s aversion towards a “liberal” media was so strong that he, as Haldeman wrote, considered “intellectuals of the left [...] a new group of fascists.”⁴⁴¹ Differing opinions amongst scholars exist about the truth of the liberal bias claims during the Nixon administration (see III.2.3). As scholars disagree, it is hard to determine whether the media had a real liberal bias. However, it can be said with certainty that Nixon strongly felt a need for a more conservative media.

⁴³⁷ Hamilton, “Attacks on the Press Have Helped Bring Down a President Before.”

⁴³⁸ Michael E. Eidenmuller, “Transcript of Spiro Agnew Speech TV News Coverage - Delivered November 13, 1969, Des Moines, Iowa,” *American Rhetoric*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/Spiro%20Agnew%20-%20TV%20News%20Coverage.pdf> (accessed April 3, 2020).

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid; Hamilton, “Attacks on the Press Have Helped Bring Down a President Before.”

⁴⁴¹ Harry R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 213, 294.

It therefore makes sense that the White House made an active distinction between media personnel based on their coverage of the administration. Staff, for instance, compiled lists of the media assessing “commentators’ attitudes towards the Nixon administration,” assigning their reporting adjectives as “excellent,” “middle,” or “poor,” frequently with extra notes like “willing to help” or “pro Kennedy.”⁴⁴² This not only shows that they actively kept an eye on their “enemy,” but also reflects an unhealthy obsession with the media in general.

Yet, matters did not remain at that observing level. Nixon also had a now famous ‘enemy list.’ The people on it – in one way or another – were politically opposed to him. Not surprisingly, there were several journalists on the list, but also politicians and celebrities.⁴⁴³ Administration officials later claimed that the list did not lead to any actions, yet some individuals on the list experienced harassment, such as being audited more frequently by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).⁴⁴⁴

Moreover, Nixon had journalists’ phones illegally wiretapped and the administration had planned to use several political institutions to attack the media. Amongst them were the IRS, the Department of Justice, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).⁴⁴⁵ The Nixon administration started to use the latter in October 1969. The strategy was to apply the Fairness Doctrine (see III.2.2). Moreover, the administration threatened to challenge TV license renewals of television stations. A network affected by the administration’s strategy was *CBS*. It aired Nixon’s speeches on Vietnam policy and afterwards gave the Democratic National Committee (DNC) a chance to respond on air. The Republican National Committee (RNC) claimed that the DNC had talked about other topics than the Vietnam policy and requested airtime under the Fairness Doctrine to address these. *CBS* denied the request. Thus, the FCC had to decide and ruled that the RNC’s request was legitimate. Although, the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit later decided in favor of the TV network, the Nixon

⁴⁴² Press Commentators’ Attitude Toward the Nixon Administration, E.O.B. Office Desk--August 10, 1974 [Notable Quotations; Poll Results; the Press's Attitude Towards the Administration] [2 of 4], Box 185, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: President's Personal File, Materials Removed from the President's Desk, RMNL.

⁴⁴³ Randall J. Stephens, “Richard Nixon's Authoritarian Loathing of the Media Lives on in Donald Trump.”

⁴⁴⁴ Kevin Hillstrom, *Watergate*, Defining Moments (Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, 2004), 6,7.

⁴⁴⁵ Melissa de Witte, “Stanford Scholar Draws Historical Parallels Between the Press and Presidencies”; Oscar Winberg, “When It Comes to Harassing the Media, Trump Is No Nixon.”

administration was still successful. In 1973, *CBS* discontinued the analysis that had previously followed Nixon's statements.⁴⁴⁶

However, the president did not only use political institutions as measures against the media. Although, Nixon "privately mus[ed] about how to discredit CBS's Walter Cronkite and other correspondents," he was more cautious to attack individual journalists publicly.⁴⁴⁷ There was one case where the Nixon administration secretly went far beyond the discreditation of a journalist. Jack Anderson, an American newspaper columnist, belonged to one of Nixon's most hated journalists. According to Mark Feldstein, Anderson was a "widely read and feared newsman" who reached about 70 million people with his syndicated column *Washington Merry-Go-Round*. After Anderson published several stories about U.S. government plans to overthrow the incumbent President of Chile Salvador Allende in 1972, two White House operatives, Gordon G. Liddy and E. Howard Hunt, later involved in the Watergate scandal, discussed to assassinate Anderson.⁴⁴⁸ Several different options were looked at, among them "painting the steering wheel of a car" with a drug like LSD, likely leading to a fatal car accident of Anderson. Although several plans were created, "it appears that the planning was terminated in an early stage." Feldstein noted that Nixon's role in the "assassination plot may never be known" as no connection directly linking Nixon to the discussions was found. Yet, Feldstein argues that it is hard to envision that an assassination was plotted "without at least the tacit approval" by Nixon.⁴⁴⁹

Yet, Nixon, did not think that all the media were bad. Nixon also had friends in the media, as for instance, Bert Andrews. Stephen Hess claims that the former bureau chief of the *Herald Tribune Washington* "became sort of a mentor to Nixon during the House investigation of accused spy Alger Hiss."⁴⁵⁰ Eleanor Randolph agrees with Hess that Nixon

⁴⁴⁶ Thomas W. Hazlett and David W. Sosa, "'Chilling' the Internet? Lessons from FCC Regulation of Radio Broadcasting," *Michigan Telecommunications and Technology Law Review*, 4, no. 1 (1998), 35–68: 48–51.

⁴⁴⁷ Nancy Benac, "Remember Nixon? There's History Behind Trump's Press Attacks," *The Seattle Times*, February 17, 2017, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/remember-nixon-theres-history-behind-trumps-press-attacks/> (accessed April 20, 2020).

⁴⁴⁸ Mark A. Feldstein, *Poisoning the Press: Richard Nixon, Jack Anderson, and the Rise of Washington's Scandal Culture* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 3-5, 268.

⁴⁴⁹ "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports on Foreign and Military Intelligence - Book IV: Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities United States Senate.," *U.S. Government Printing Office* (April 23, 1976), 136–37; Feldstein, *Poisoning the Press*, 289.

⁴⁵⁰ Hernandez, "Nixon and the Press": 83. While serving in the U.S. House of Representatives, Nixon was a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). This committee investigated claims of communist activities in the United States. Nixon was largely responsible for the success of the investigation of Alger Hiss and became a national figure through it. Former State Department official Alger Hiss was accused of working for the Soviet Union. In 1950 he was convicted of perjury but until his death asserted his innocence. The case also reinforced Nixon's anti-communist views.

had friends in the media, though she argues that journalists were “added or dropped” as friends depending on whether “stories were deemed good or bad by the White House.”⁴⁵¹ On a taped conversation of 1972, even Nixon approved of certain reporters as he positively noted that “there are still a few patriots.”⁴⁵² Moreover, several memoranda show that the Nixon White House kept track of media friendly to the administration, making lists of media representatives “who should receive special treatment” or identifying individuals “who could be given a special stroke” due to their favorable reporting.⁴⁵³ This shows that although Nixon did not think highly of most of the media, he still valued selected journalists.

Something that caused a legal fight between the Nixon administration and the media was the leak of the *Pentagon Papers* by former military analyst Daniel Ellsberg in 1971. *The New York Times* was the first to publish the top-secret study on the ever-deepening involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War. Nixon wrote in his memoirs that to keep *The New York Times* from publishing the material, his administration “had only two choices: we could do nothing, or we could move for an injunction.” Nixon decided on the latter as he thought that it was not a newspaper’s job “to judge the impact of a top-secret document” and that the publication was irresponsible as well as a threat to national security. In the end, the case was decided by the Supreme Court which – to Nixon’s frustration – ruled in favor of *The New York Times*.⁴⁵⁴ As a response to Ellsberg’s leak, the Nixon administration created the White House Plumbers with the task to “prevent similar leaks in the future.”⁴⁵⁵

When looking at the above instances, Grossman and Kumar argue rightly that the attacks “were different in scale from those of previous administrations; [...] officials were willing to use their political, legal, and extralegal resources to reduce the profits, power, and public status of news organizations.” With their attacks, the Nixon administration “constituted a

⁴⁵¹ Eleanor Randolph, “The Lists of Nixon's Friends,” *The Washington Post*, June 3, 1987, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1987/06/03/the-lists-of-nixons-friends/b9ac737b-d945-472f-9047-68c2662d318a/> (accessed April 6, 2020).

⁴⁵² Brinkley and Nichter, *The Nixon Tapes : 1971-1972*, 703.

⁴⁵³ Memorandum from Ronald L. Ziegler to the President, March 14, 1970, Memorandum from Larry Higby to H.R. Haldeman, March 25, 1970, Memorandum from Herbert G. Klein to H.R. Haldeman, March 21, 1970, Memorandum from Herbert G. Klein to the President, October 21, 1969, E.O.B. Office Desk – August 10, 1974 [Notable Quotations; Poll Results; the Press's Attitude Towards the Administration] [2 of 4] + [3 of 4], Box 185, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: President's Personal File, Materials Removed from the President's Desk, RMNL.

⁴⁵⁴ Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, 508–511.

⁴⁵⁵ Niraj Chokshi, “Behind the Race to Publish the Top-Secret Pentagon Papers,” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/us/pentagon-papers-post.html?searchResultPosition=1> (accessed August 19, 2021).

massive and unprecedented assault on the legitimacy of news organizations' activities."⁴⁵⁶ Cheryl Arvidson agrees that "a lot of public disdain for the press was spawned during the Nixon administration." Ellen Hume concurs that "one of Nixon's legacies [...] [is the] press bashing as a political strategy," for instance, painting the media as the liberal elites. Many of his successors have successfully used this strategy as well.⁴⁵⁷ Jon Marshall goes even further stating that Nixon started "the war" against the media many of his successors have carried on: "Intimidating journalists, avoiding White House reporters, staging events for television [...] were all originally Nixonian tactics."⁴⁵⁸ That such actions would lead to an extremely tense and – at times – aggressive relationship between the president and the media, seems evident.

How the president handled himself during press conferences, a forum of very close interaction with many of his "enemies," is discussed in the following chapter in general and further analyzed in connection to Watergate in Section V.4.1.

2. *Richard M. Nixon and Press Conferences*

Nixon was the last chief executive to use the Oval Office for press conferences as it became too small for the press corps. Nixon's preferred venue for his press conferences was the East Room, where he held about half of them.⁴⁵⁹ Mostly, the president "did pretty well" during his press conferences. He was well-spoken and provided facts and data that the press corps needed.⁴⁶⁰ The atmosphere was generally civil, so much that exceptions to this norm stood out.⁴⁶¹

At 11 a.m. on January 27, 1969, Nixon held his first presidential news conference in the East Room of the White House. The conference was broadcast via radio and television. Interestingly, Nixon decided to forego the opening statement to leave more time for questions by the correspondents. He was asked 15 questions in total on various subjects. Overall, the questions were very easy and friendly, most were concerned with what he as president planned to do on certain issues.⁴⁶²

⁴⁵⁶ Grossman and Kumar, *Portraying the President*, 290.

⁴⁵⁷ Hernandez, "Nixon and the Press": 82–3.

⁴⁵⁸ Marshall, "Nixon Is Gone, but His Media Strategy Lives On."

⁴⁵⁹ Kumar, "Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum": 186.

⁴⁶⁰ Hernandez, "Nixon and the Press": 86.

⁴⁶¹ Melissa de Witte, "Stanford Scholar Draws Historical Parallels Between the Press and Presidencies."

⁴⁶² "The President's News Conference | January 27, 1969," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-152> (accessed November 24, 2022).

In a short clip available from the conference, one can see Nixon standing on a small podium behind a microphone and a room filled with reporters. The president seemed relatively comfortable, quickly going through the questions.⁴⁶³ Nixon also made a joke during one of his answers at the expense of a guideline by his predecessor, which caused laughter among the correspondents.⁴⁶⁴

Yet, with Watergate and the escalating Vietnam War, the president's relationship with the media became more visibly tense.⁴⁶⁵ An exchange at a press conference on October 26, 1973, reflects the decay of the relationship. When a correspondent asked Nixon about his anger with the news coverage on the Watergate scandal, Nixon replied: "Don't get the impression that you arouse my anger. [...] You see, one can only be angry with those he respects."⁴⁶⁶ This was a very strong statement by a president as he openly implied, he did not respect at least parts of the media. The tapes and government documents (see V.1) would later reveal his extremely negative opinion on the media, confirming such statements.

Nixon adapted the press conferences to his needs by being the first president to hold them during prime time.⁴⁶⁷ Through this the 37th president "endowed the press conference with new levels of drama and seriousness." Nixon used this timing for about 25 percent of his press conferences. As the networks suspended their prime-time programs for them, Nixon was able to directly communicate with the American public on new levels: "The press conferences became a national moment in which people stopped to watch and listen to their president."⁴⁶⁸ The exact evening time slot was also very crucial for "having the maximum portion of the American audience hear and see their President" across different times zones. Klein, for instance, argued in a memorandum to the president for a later evening time slot (9 p.m. EST instead of 7 p.m. EST), to maximize the audience.⁴⁶⁹ With

⁴⁶³ "SYND 27-01-69 President Nixon Holds a Press Conference on Foreign Policy Aims," *AP Archive YouTube Channel*, July 21, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXWgE6h57J0> (accessed November 24, 2022).

⁴⁶⁴ "The President's News Conference | January 27, 1969."

⁴⁶⁵ Hernandez, "Nixon and the Press": 82–86, 88.

⁴⁶⁶ "The President's News Conference | October 26, 1973," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-84> (accessed June 29, 2022). At this time, Nixon had for months rejected to release requested tapes and had just gotten rid of the Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox through the Saturday Night Massacre on October 20. A more detailed description of the development on the Watergate affair can be found in Chapter V.4.

⁴⁶⁷ Martha Joynt Kumar, "Presidential Press Conferences."

⁴⁶⁸ Kumar, "Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum": 184.

⁴⁶⁹ Memorandum from Herbert G. Klein to the President, December 8, 1970, Memoranda to President - I [2 of 3], Box 3, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Herbert G. Klein, Memoranda with the President, RMNL.

only few channels available, the audience for televised press conferences was larger than today. For instance, Nixon's press conference of March 4, 1969, was live broadcast by the three major networks at 9 p.m. and watched by 59 percent of households with televisions.⁴⁷⁰

Yet, the number of press conferences Nixon held per year was on average about 7, thus standing in stark contrast to Kennedy's average of about 23.⁴⁷¹ This was not missed by the media who complained about the low frequency. In a White House memorandum on a meeting with media representatives in December 1970, it was recorded that there was "a series of questions and complaints regarding Presidential press availability, and the lack of press conferences."⁴⁷² Nixon's unavailability was reflective of his disdain for the media, and the more the Watergate scandal proceeded, the less prime-time press conferences he held. In 1973 and 1974, Nixon held no prime-time press conference.⁴⁷³ This could indicate that he did not want to have a large audience when being asked challenging questions on Watergate by the press corp. This is further supported by the fact that he preferred to use addresses to the nation on the Watergate investigation in the years 1973 and 1974, where only his prepared words were televised with no subsequent press questions (see V.4.2). In addition, the questioning by the press corps had started to change in the late 1960s. President Nixon already faced questions that were more adversarial and focused on the accountability of the president's policies. Meanwhile, journalists were less restrained in addressing the problems or failures of the administration directly. This increased the pressure and made the press conference a more unpleasant experience for the president. The deception regarding the Watergate affair by the Nixon administration also did its part in the development of presidential journalism (see III.1.2 and III.2).⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷⁰ Melissa de Witte, "Stanford Scholar Draws Historical Parallels Between the Press and Presidencies." Statistics quoted in de Witte from Nielsen Media Research (1993). Until the 1980s, it was easier for presidents to get prime-time slots for their press conferences as due to the few other channels viewers could go to, the network's viewership would not decrease so drastically.

⁴⁷¹ Gerhard Peters, "Presidential News Conferences," *The American Presidency Project*, July 24, 2022, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/presidential-news-conferences> (accessed September 2, 2022).

⁴⁷² Memorandum from Robert C. Odle, Jr. to Mr. Klein, December 10, 1970, Memoranda to President - I [2 of 3], Box 3, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Herbert G. Klein, Memoranda with the President, RMNL.

⁴⁷³ Gerhard Peters, "Presidential News Conferences."

⁴⁷⁴ Steven E. Clayman et al., "A Watershed in White House Journalism: Explaining the Post-1968 Rise of Aggressive Presidential News," *Political Communication*, 27, no. 3 (2010), 229–47: 229, 242; John Heritage and Steven E. Clayman, "The Changing Tenor of Questioning over Time: Tracking a Question Form Across US Presidential News Conferences, 1953–2000," *Journalism Practice*, 7, no. 4 (2013), 481–501: 481–2.

As Nixon did not like most of the media, he used television to circumvent them. Over the course of his political career, Nixon had used television sometimes more, sometimes less successfully.

3. *Richard M. Nixon and Television*

Shortly before the general presidential election of 1952, then Vice Presidential Candidate Nixon was accused of financial campaign corruption. He decided to address people directly and use the medium television for this purpose.⁴⁷⁵ He began his half-hour televised speech with the words: “I come before you tonight as a candidate for the Vice Presidency and as a man whose honesty and integrity has been questioned.” He then proceeded by explaining the charges made against him and denied them, providing extensive explanations on political expenses. Over the further course of the speech, Nixon portrayed himself as coming from modest means and “that every dime that we’ve [Nixon and his wife] got is honestly ours.”⁴⁷⁶ According to Greenberg, he “painted, in the most vivid colors [...], a portrait of himself as an American everyman.”⁴⁷⁷ Yet, Nixon admitted to have gotten a dog by a supporter, which one of his daughters named Checkers. Nixon argued as “the kids [...] love the dog, and I just want to say this, right now, [...] we're gonna keep it.” At the end of the speech, he asked the public to “wire and write the Republican National Committee whether you think I should stay on or whether I should get off [the vice presidential ticket].”⁴⁷⁸ No politician before him had had such a large audience and the response by the public was overwhelmingly positive. With this speech – dubbed Checkers speech – Nixon had not only changed the opinion of the public in his favor but also stayed on the ticket.⁴⁷⁹

Another instance where television worked in Nixon’s favor was the famous meeting with premier of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev in 1959. During a tour through the American National Exhibition in Moscow, the two politicians engaged in a heated debate on capitalism versus communism. The dispute happened in front of an American model

⁴⁷⁵ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 316–17.

⁴⁷⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Address of Senator Nixon to the American People: The ‘Checkers Speech’ | September 23, 1952,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-senator-nixon-the-american-people-the-checkers-speech> (accessed May 9, 2022). For this speech, the airtime had to be paid. It was also broadcast via radio.

⁴⁷⁷ David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Norton & Company, 2003), 32.

⁴⁷⁸ Richard M. Nixon, “Address of Senator Nixon to the American People: The ‘Checkers Speech’ | September 23, 1952.”

⁴⁷⁹ Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow*, 32; Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 317.

kitchen, hence the name Kitchen Debate.⁴⁸⁰ Although no film footage of the actual Kitchen Debate exists, another discussion between the two men at the exhibition was recorded in front of cameras. This exchange was later broadcast on television and described by one media outlet as:

Mr. Nixon and Mr. Khrushchev were seen and heard as they exchanged verbal blows and discussed the need for free exchange of ideas. [...] To the viewer the harshness of the words were mitigated by the general air of joviality as Mr. Khrushchev gestured broadly with his hands and Mr. Nixon beamed.⁴⁸¹

In his exchanges with the Soviet leader, Vice President Nixon was able to present himself convincingly and earned “a reputation as a diplomatic master” among Americans.⁴⁸²

Yet, not all television appearances went according to plan. During the television debates of Nixon’s first presidential run, his Democratic opponent John F. Kennedy outperformed Nixon, in particular, during the first debate (see IV.3). But why did Nixon actually agree to the debates and give a platform to his nationally lesser-known opponent? Especially, when President Eisenhower had warned him against debating Kennedy as the debates “would elevate Kennedy’s limited experience in leadership by conveying the image of two equally qualified candidates, despite Nixon’s fuller résumé.”⁴⁸³ Nixon wrote in his memoirs that he “knew that the debates would benefit Kennedy more than me by giving his [Kennedy’s] views national exposure.” Yet, the vice president had his reason to enter the debates. “There was no way I could refuse to debate without having Kennedy and the media turn my refusal into a central campaign issue. The question [...] was not whether to debate, but how to arrange the debates so as to give Kennedy the least possible advantage.”⁴⁸⁴ According to Cramer Brownell, the vice president wanted to use the debates to display his knowledge and qualifications.⁴⁸⁵ Sorensen also had a point when arguing that during his career Nixon had successfully used television, as with the Checkers speech, and with his political experience he could be confident to beat Kennedy in the debates.

⁴⁸⁰ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 317.

⁴⁸¹ Richard F. Shepard, “Debate Goes on TV over Soviet Protest: Khrushchev-Nixon Debate Aired on TV Here over Soviet Protest,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 1959, 1–2, 2.

⁴⁸² Jennifer Latson, “When Khrushchev Said No to Pepsi but Yes to Peace,” *Time*, July 24, 2015, <https://time.com/3961121/khrushchev-nixon-kitchen-debate/> (accessed May 20, 2022).

⁴⁸³ Mary A. Watson, “The Kennedy-Nixon Debates: The Launch of Television’s Transformation of U.S. Politics and Popular Culture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John F. Kennedy*, ed. Andrew Hoberek, 45–58 (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 47.

⁴⁸⁴ Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, 217.

⁴⁸⁵ Kathryn Cramer Brownell, “Commentary: Why Presidential Debates Can Cut Through the Campaign Hoopla,” *Reuters*, September 23, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-debate-commentary-idUSKCN11T0AP> (accessed August 19, 2021).

Moreover, the millions of voters he could possibly reach must have also been tempting.⁴⁸⁶ Nixon would not have been wrong assuming all of these advantages; however, the debates turned out differently than Nixon expected (see IV.3).

As Nixon was convinced to have lost the presidential race against Kennedy because of voter fraud as well as an inferior media image and “publicity machine,” he hired television and advertising professionals for his second presidential run.⁴⁸⁷ During the campaign he used new media strategies, that incorporated film and television production techniques.⁴⁸⁸ For instance, the presidential candidate appeared on the popular sketch comedy television show *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In*. During the September 16, 1968 episode, Nixon uttered the famous phrase “Sock it to me?” Although older Americans felt that an appearance by a presidential candidate “on such a foolish” show was “undignified,” it allowed Nixon to connect to a younger audience, utilize “entertainment television to bypass the press and actively construct a public image of a likable, popular personality to assert his political legitimacy.”⁴⁸⁹

Moreover, Nixon did several one-hour programs where he would face questions by a selected group of people in front of an audience. These programs were also only broadcast regionally, which meant Nixon could use the same statements in every program, “only the press would be bored and the press had been written off already.” However, Nixon also had the freedom – if it was found useful – to slightly adjust his answers, so that they would fit the regional audience better.⁴⁹⁰ These programs were the centerpiece of Nixon’s local advertising strategy, their producer was the later CEO of *Fox News* Roger Ailes.⁴⁹¹ Overall, Nixon used “a well-oiled publicity machine” for his second run for the presidency, focused on “the cheap publicity for which he had previously condemned his opponent [JFK].”⁴⁹²

⁴⁸⁶ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 196.

⁴⁸⁷ Roger Morris, “Richard Nixon,” in *The American Presidency*, ed. Alan Brinkley and Davis Dyer, 425–41 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 431; Kathryn Cramer Brownell, “The Making of the Celebrity Presidency,” in *Recapturing the Oval Office: New Historical Approaches to the American Presidency*, ed. Brian Balogh and Bruce J. Schulman, 162–74 (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2015), 164, 173.

⁴⁸⁸ Kathryn Cramer Brownell, *Showbiz Politics: Hollywood in American Political Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 191.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 188–89.

⁴⁹⁰ Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1988), 62–63.

⁴⁹¹ Kathleen H. Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 230.

⁴⁹² Kathryn Cramer Brownell, “The Making of the Celebrity Presidency,” in *Recapturing the Oval Office*, 173; Memorandum from Ellsworth to DC, Mitchell, Stans, Haldeman, Flanigan, Kleindienst, Garment, June 09, 1968, Strategy, Box 81, Nixon Presidential Returned Materials Collection: White House Central Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Garment, Len 1968 Political Campaign File, Topical File Box 15 of 29, RMNL.

As president, Nixon continued to be discontent with his media coverage and thus, one main part of his media strategy was circumventing them (for the second part, attacking the media, see V.1). To bypass the White House press corps, he, for instance, gave interviews to local media who likely asked simpler questions as they were “dazzled by the chance to interview a president.”⁴⁹³ Yet, he preferred to “go directly to the people through live television events.”⁴⁹⁴ Nixon’s advisors thought of such circumvention as a tool for Nixon to personally connect with his voters.⁴⁹⁵

With his prime-time press conferences, Nixon was also able to directly reach a large portion of the American public who were sitting in front of their televisions during these hours (see V.2).⁴⁹⁶ Yet, the prime-time slot was not only used for press conferences. Nixon appeared several times on television to address the nation and to present his viewpoints. In contrast to the press conferences, the addresses offered an unfiltered way to the American public. Although the media broadcast them, they would not take part in the addresses. Nixon could try to convince the viewer of his opinion on specific issues by bringing his thoughts directly to the viewers. However, when networks started to broadcast critical analyses of his addresses directly after them, the president fumed about them countering his unfiltered communication. He went on to his second part of his media strategy: attacking them and send out his vice president to attack them or looked at ways to go after them through government institutions as the IRS or the FCC (see V.1).⁴⁹⁷

Nixon also used Addresses to the Nation in connection to the Watergate affair.

4. Watergate

Scholars rightly observed “that the Watergate scandal was a strangely fitting climax to Nixon’s long political career” since his path to the presidency “had been shrouded in controversy from the very beginning.” At the time Nixon assumed office, issues as the Vietnam War or civil rights had divided the country and partisanship was widespread among the two parties. Nixon was an experienced politician, yet he was also “distrustful, insecure, and vindictive.” The political environment in combination with his personality lead to illegal activities that would end his presidency.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹³ Marshall, “Nixon Is Gone, but His Media Strategy Lives On.”

⁴⁹⁴ Hamilton, “Attacks on the Press Have Helped Bring Down a President Before.”

⁴⁹⁵ Cramer Brownell, “Commentary: Why Presidential Debates Can Cut through the Campaign Hoopla.”

⁴⁹⁶ Kumar, “Source Material: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance and Evolution of an Enduring Forum”: 184.

⁴⁹⁷ Oscar Winberg, “When It Comes to Harassing the Media, Trump Is No Nixon.”

⁴⁹⁸ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 3–5.

Even before Watergate, the White House had carried out illegal activities. Opponents had been surveilled, journalists had been wiretapped, or documents had been forged.⁴⁹⁹ Yet, one of the most scandalous illegal activities took place in September 1971. The *Pentagon Papers* had been leaked by the former military analyst Daniel Ellsberg in 1971. After *The New York Times* had begun to publish parts of the top-secret study, the president created the White House Plumbers, a team whose job it was “to prevent similar leaks in the future.”⁵⁰⁰ However, this team not only carried out actions against Nixon's enemies but – in September 1971 – also broke into the office of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist to get incriminating material on him. The plan was to discredit Ellsberg in the press.⁵⁰¹

As the presidential election of 1972 came closer, the president hoped to use a major victory in order to further his policies. Since the administration had not shied away from illegal activities in the first term, it also did not do so during the reelection campaign.⁵⁰²

At the end of May 1972, five people broke into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate complex to access documents and place wiretaps. Since one wiretap did not function properly, on June 17, 1972, the burglars tried to repair it. However, this time, they were caught by a security guard and arrested by the police. The FBI started to investigate the break-in.⁵⁰³

Initially, it did not look like the burglary would turn into a major scandal to many observers. Yet, as it became clear that the burglars were connected to the Committee to Re-Elect the President (officially CRP but mostly known as CREEP) and thus the White House, the initial calm of the White House disappeared. They worried that the investigation might not only uncover the connection of the burglars to CREEP but also the illegal activities that had taken place over the past years. Thus, a cover-up was planned. Documents were destroyed and bribes for the silence of the arrested arranged. And already on the third day after the burglary gone wrong, Nixon and Haldeman spoke about how to hinder the FBI investigation. This is known due to the secret taping system Nixon had installed in the White House. The so-called “smoking gun” tape also originated during this time. On a tape of June 23, 1972 (six days after the burglars were caught), the president and Haldeman talked about using the CIA to contain the FBI investigation into the

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 5–6.

⁵⁰⁰ Niraj Chokshi, “Behind the Race to Publish the Top-Secret Pentagon Papers.” Some of the “plumbers” were later involved in the Watergate break-in.

⁵⁰¹ Michael E. Miller, “Like Trump, Nixon Was Obsessed with Leaks. It Led to Watergate – and Ruin,” *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/06/22/like-trump-nixon-was-obsessed-with-leaks-it-led-to-watergate-and-ruin/> (accessed April 3, 2020).

⁵⁰² Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 10–11.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., 13, 15–16.

Watergate break-in. This would later lead to Nixon's resignation as the conversation proved that Nixon knew about and actively planned the cover-up.⁵⁰⁴

At the beginning, the cover-up seemed to work quite well, and Watergate was not a major issue during the reelection campaign. Nixon won the presidential election in a landslide on November 7, 1972.⁵⁰⁵ This was also due to a relatively uninterested press concerning Watergate. Although the investigation in the break-in did not disappear from the press and public view, not many media outlets followed the story. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *The Washington Post* were almost the only ones actively and diligently pursuing the issue and frequently publishing stories. This lack of interest was also reflected in the four press conferences Nixon held since the break-in until his reelection as he was only asked three questions on Watergate (see V.4.1). The three major networks spent more time covering the Watergate affair than the print media, yet their reporting had not greatly influenced public opinion.⁵⁰⁶ Incomprehensible from today's perspective, a *Gallup* poll of September 1972 showed that only 52 percent of the public knew about Watergate.⁵⁰⁷

When in January of 1973 the burglars and the two who had planned the break-in (E. Howard Hunt, G. Gordon Liddy) were convicted, it looked as if the White House had successfully covered-up its involvement. Yet, the presiding judge, John Sirica, passed harsh sentences, however indicating reducing them considerably if the convicted cooperated, which they so far had not. This step by the judge came from a suspicion that many involved in the investigation shared: the convicted received hush money or were somehow put under pressure to be silent.⁵⁰⁸ Furthermore, a major blow to the White House came in February with the establishment of the Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities led by Senator Sam Ervin, commonly known as the Ervin or Watergate Committee.⁵⁰⁹ But Nixon still enjoyed an approval rating of 68 percent.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 17, 19–22; “‘Smoking Gun’: Richard Nixon and Bob Haldeman Discuss the Watergate Break-In, June 23, 1972,” *RMNL YouTube Channel*, June 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehKRQ0N-dIg> (accessed November 26, 2022), 00:13–05:58. A smoking gun is proof that a shot was fired. Thus, being evidence of a crime. Hence, the name for the tape.

⁵⁰⁵ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 24–26. It should not go unmentioned, however, that the landslide victory did not fully reflect the entire situation. Nixon used some “dirty tricks” in the Democratic primary to increase his chances of re-election in 1972. Among other things, there was a campaign of forged letters against the possible strong candidate, Democratic Senator Edmund S. Muskie. Nevertheless, the Watergate scandal did not have a major influence in the election.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 22–24.

⁵⁰⁷ James C. Strouse, *The Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Public Policy Analysis: Linkage Explorations* (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1975), 157.

⁵⁰⁸ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 27.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁵¹⁰ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1972-1977* 1 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978), 95.

March 1973 was not a good month for the White House. During his confirmation hearings in the Senate, Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray disclosed to having shared FBI reports on Watergate with White House Counsel John Dean, discussed the matter with him and had allowed Dean to be present at over a dozen FBI interviews during the investigation. This revelation led to an increase in media coverage that prior had been more sporadic. The new scrutiny distressed the White House, and its media interaction became more contentious.⁵¹¹

Moreover, Nixon released a statement on executive privilege which was an extremely “broad interpretation of the concept,” basically arguing that all conversations he had with his aides were covered by executive privilege. Thus, the participants of the conversations are not legally obliged to disclose the conversations’ content. This interpretation would hinder close aides to testify before the committee about these conversations. Dean used this interpretation when being called to testify and simply refused.⁵¹²

Toward the end of March 1973, Judge Sirica’s plan had worked, as one of the burglars, James McCord, now wanted to cooperate. In a letter to the judge, McCord revealed that the defendants were pressured to be silent about the involvement of CREEP and the White House. Moreover, there were more people involved than currently identified. With this revelation, the Watergate affair now turned into front page news. In a confidential testimony to the committee, McCord further claimed that close advisors of Nixon – among them John Dean, H.R. Haldeman, John Mitchell, Jeb Magruder and, Charles Colson – were familiar with or had backed the break-in.⁵¹³

By mid-April 1973, John Dean and Jeb Magruder had switched sides and accused John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman of several criminal offenses, in particular in connection to Watergate. Nixon became concerned that these developments would weaken his public standing. Nixon was not wrong in his assumption. A *Gallup* poll, which was conducted in the first half of April, showed that Nixon’s approval had dropped 14 percent since February to 54 percent. He also made a compromise with the committee to allow aides to testify but claim executive privilege for certain questions.⁵¹⁴

By the end of April, Nixon realized that he had to dissociate himself from his aides who were drawn more and more in the Watergate affair. Thus, he requested resignations from

⁵¹¹ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 28–29.

⁵¹² Richard M. Nixon, “Statement About Executive Privilege | March 12, 1973,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-about-executive-privilege> (accessed December 1, 2022); Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 29, 32.

⁵¹³ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 29, 31.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32–33; *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1972-1977*, 115.

Dean, Haldeman, and Ehrlichman. Furthermore, he pressured Attorney General Richard Kleindienst to resign as well. He did so because he wanted to portray to the public “that his administration placed a high premium on ethics and trustworthiness.” The resignations were announced in Nixon’s first address to the nation on Watergate (see V.4.2).⁵¹⁵

As a result of developments in the Watergate affair, calls for a special prosecutor to look into the matter grew louder. In May 1973, Archibald Cox was appointed as the special prosecutor by the new Attorney General Elliot Richardson. The President – although publicly unflustered – was angered by the appointment. Cox had a liberal background and had served in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. As the special prosecutor had a large budget at hand, he could hire many investigators and attorneys to explore “all possible offenses,” not only Watergate related ones.⁵¹⁶ This infuriated Nixon, later declaring “no White House in history could have survived the kind of operation Cox was planning.”⁵¹⁷

On May 17, 1973, the public hearings of the committee began, lasting until August 7. And some “truly explosive” statements would seize the public’s attention. The public hearings already took an unfortunate start for the White House. Several witnesses, as James McCord or Jeb Magruder, further casted doubts on the honesty of the White House through their testimonies. This led Nixon to publish a statement where he listed seven assurances. Among them, for example, “I took no part in, nor was I aware of, any subsequent efforts that may have been made to cover up Watergate” or “At no time did I attempt, or did I authorize others to attempt, to implicate the CIA in the Watergate matter.” Of the seven, three turned out to be lies. The media was divided in their evaluation of the statement. Whereas some saw it as proof that Nixon did do no wrong, others suspected him to conceal something.⁵¹⁸

One of the most impactful testimonies was made by John Dean in June 1973. During the televised hearings, he confirmed his key position in the cover-up but also charged the president and close aides with planning and managing it. By that he “painted a devastating portrait of the president as a ruthless politician with little respect for the rule of law.”

⁵¹⁵ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 33–34.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

⁵¹⁷ Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, 912.

⁵¹⁸ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 36–37; Richard M. Nixon, “Statements About the Watergate Investigations | May 22, 1973,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statements-about-the-watergate-investigations> (accessed December 2, 2022).

Moreover, Dean hinted at the existence of a taping system installed in the White House. This caused the committee to ask all following witnesses about its possible existence.⁵¹⁹ In July, Ehrlichman and Haldeman testified but both refuted Dean's testimony. Yet another testimony of utmost importance came from White House aid Alexander Butterfield. He confirmed the existence of a secret tape-recording system installed in several parts of the White House, among them the Oval Office. "The news triggered a firestorm." From that point on, the investigators, the public, and the media sensed that the tapes would likely provide the answer to the questions of the presidential knowledge and involvement. On July 17, the committee and on July 18, Archibald Cox requested the release of the tapes.⁵²⁰ Arguing that the recordings were private and handing them over would conflict with national security as well as the principle of executive privilege, Nixon rejected the requests. This angered the committee, Cox and many Americans as it queried the president's truthfulness. Nixon's approval rating dropped even further to 31 percent according to a poll conducted at the beginning of August. At the start of July, it had been at 40 percent. Cox and the committee did not want to accept Nixon's refusal and sought Judge Sirica for help. On August 29, 1973, he subpoenaed several tapes to review them privately, hoping to have found a compromise between the administration's wish for presidential privacy and the investigation. Yet, the White House decided not to comply, arguing that the president was not required by law to hand over the tapes. With this, the decision on the tapes was set to be decided by the courts.⁵²¹

October 1973 was yet another eventful month for the Nixon administration. On the 10th, Nixon's Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned due to criminal charges. Although they were not connected to Watergate, the situation further damaged the White House's reputation. House Minority Leader Gerald Ford would be sworn in as Agnew's successor two months later. On the 12th, the U.S. District Court of Appeals decided that the president had to hand over the tapes. The administration did not comply with the decision but proposed to provide edited transcripts of the recordings. In return, Nixon demanded that the special prosecutor stop requesting the tapes and other material by judicial process. Cox declined. Thus, on Saturday October 20, Nixon asked the attorney general, the special prosecutor's supervisor, to fire Cox. However, Richardson rejected the demand and resigned. When Deputy Attorney General William French Smith also refused Nixon's request and resigned

⁵¹⁹ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 38, 43.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40, 44.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 46; *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1972-1977*, 138, 154.

shortly after, the decision fell on the next in line, Solicitor General Robert Bork, who did fire the Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox. At first, the White House was relieved as they had gotten rid of their “foe” who wanted the tapes. Yet, they did not expect the intensity of the backlash they would face. It is best illustrated by the name given to the event: “Saturday Night Massacre.” Bills that demanded an impeachment investigation were introduced in Congress, and the media coverage turned extremely negative. Even formerly supportive newspapers as *The Salt Lake Tribune* urged Nixon to resign. The president’s approval ratings further decreased to 27 percent in a poll taken at the beginning of November. This reaction surprised the Nixon White House, which now had to fill the open positions carefully. The choice fell on William Saxbe to be the new attorney general and as the new special prosecutor, they selected Leon Jaworski. The latter drew some criticism as he had been selected by the White House, not the AG. Yet, as it turned out, these suspicions were unfounded.⁵²²

Finally in December 1973, Nixon handed over seven of the nine requested tapes to Sirica. Prior, the White House had suddenly alleged that the two missing tapes never existed. Additionally, one of the seven remaining tapes had a gap of 18.5 minutes. For a part of the gap the president’s secretary took responsibility. Yet her account that was not credible.⁵²³ Critics argued that this was proof “that Nixon could not be trusted with the tapes.” The judge would now have to decide which tapes were covered by executive privilege. He confirmed the White House’s executive privilege and irrelevance claims on three tapes, the others were handed to the special prosecutor and the grand jury.⁵²⁴

The year 1974 would not get any better for Nixon. In January, the special prosecutor requested further tapes. This time, the White House did not officially refuse to hand them over for fear of a backlash from the public and Congress, yet they used various tactics to delay the process. Then on February 6, the House voted in favor of starting an impeachment inquiry and a couple of weeks later requested further tapes. This worried Nixon, as the House had the constitutional power to impeach him. Again, the president tried to protract the process. About two months later, the White House made 1,300 pages of edited tape transcripts available, trying to appease the public and the committee but keeping the actual tapes under lock. On the same day, Nixon gave his third Address on the

⁵²² Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 47-49, 51-52; *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1972-1977*, 210.

⁵²³ The position that she would have had to hold for several minutes to cause the gap was re-enacted. It represented quite a physical stretch, and she even would have had to press an additional button.

⁵²⁴ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 50-52.

Watergate investigations (see V.4.2). Lawmakers, and the public were shocked by the pure political calculation, racist comments, and profanity that ran through the transcripts.⁵²⁵

On July 24, 1974, the fight over the tapes ended and from that point on, the scandal developed fast. The Supreme Court ruled unanimously that Nixon had to hand over all subpoenaed tapes. With this decision, Nixon's fate was sealed, and the president knew it since the subpoenaed tapes included what would become known as the "smoking gun" tape. At the end of July, the House Judiciary Committee passed three articles of impeachment, bringing them to the House of Representatives for a full vote. Ultimately, on August 5, the president made available all requested tapes. Moreover, in a statement Nixon admitted "that portions of the tapes of these June 23 conversations are at variance with certain of my previous statements." With the tapes published, impeachment and conviction were unavoidable. Now also Republican members of Congress overwhelmingly voiced their votes for impeachment and conviction. Thus, on August 8, 1974, Nixon gave his resignation speech. One day later at noon, Gerald Ford was sworn in as president. But before that Nixon would publicly say good-bye to his staff (see V.4.2).⁵²⁶

When Nixon resigned, his approval rating was at 24 percent, which is the lowest of any president at their time of leaving office.⁵²⁷ Thus, Americans reacted for the most part with relief and saw the president's resignation as a chance to get passed the scandal and return to "normal" conduct of office. The public was divided on how to proceed now: prosecute Nixon or was his resignation sufficient punishment? In the hopes of ending the public discussion, President Ford granted Nixon "a full, free, and absolute pardon" on September 8, 1974.⁵²⁸

After his time as president, Nixon worked on rehabilitating his image and wrote several books. In part, it worked, yet Watergate would always stick to him and his presidency. One of the most asked questions remains why Nixon did not destroy the tapes. Although it

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 52–55.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 56–59, 63–64, 66; Richard M. Nixon, "Statement Announcing Availability of Additional Transcripts of Presidential Tape Recordings | August 5, 1974," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-announcing-availability-additional-transcripts-presidential-tape-recordings> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁵²⁷ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1972–1977*, 325; Gerhard Peters, "Final Presidential Job Approval Ratings: Truman - Trump," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/final-presidential-job-approval-ratings> (accessed February 27, 2023). Approval ratings recorded since President Truman, excluding Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy.

⁵²⁸ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 65–66, 68; Gerald R. Ford, "Proclamation 4311 – Granting Pardon to Richard Nixon | September 08, 1974," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-4311-granting-pardon-richard-nixon> (accessed December 8, 2022).

would have been denounced strongly, impeachment or even conviction would have been much less likely. Historians can only speculate, but a likely reason is that Nixon was sure that it was legally impossible to take the tapes from him. He believed that they were his property and covered by executive privilege.⁵²⁹

4.1 Press Conferences During Watergate

Press Conferences Before Reelection

Correspondents at first did not seem to judge the Watergate break-in as an issue connected to the president or even relevant to the president. During the five press conferences Nixon held since the failed break-in on June 17 until his reelection on November 7, 1972, he was only asked three questions on Watergate.⁵³⁰

Nixon began his first press conference since the break-in with a very short opening statement where he did not mention Watergate. However, the first question asked by a correspondent was on the break-in.⁵³¹ The reporter wanted to know whether the claim by the DNC chairman “that the people who bugged his headquarters had a direct link to the White House” was right. Nixon denied the charge, referring to statements by his Press Secretary Ron Ziegler and by John Mitchell, who was head of the Committee for the Reelection of the President:

Mr. Ziegler and also Mr. Mitchell, speaking for the campaign committee, have responded to questions on this in great detail. They have stated my position and have also stated the facts accurately. This kind of activity, as Mr. Ziegler has indicated, has no place whatever in our electoral process, or in our governmental process. And, as Mr. Ziegler has stated, the White House has had no involvement whatever in this particular incident.⁵³²

He continued with a typical answer stating that “the matter is under investigation [...] by the proper legal authorities, by the District of Columbia police, and by the FBI. I will not comment on those matters, particularly since possible criminal charges are involved.”⁵³³

Correspondents seemed satisfied with this answer and no further questions on Watergate were asked during this press conference. Yet, two days prior, on June 20, Nixon and

⁵²⁹ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 44–45, 77.

⁵³⁰ Nixon did not hold a press conference after the one on October 5, 1972 (before his reelection) until January 31, 1973 (after his second inauguration). Besides the press conferences where Nixon was asked on Watergate, a live broadcast question-and-answer session is included as it is deemed relevant for the analysis.

⁵³¹ The names of the correspondents are not mentioned in the transcripts of the press conferences. Questioners are marked exclusively with a “Q.” Therefore, correspondents could only be identified if the president addressed them by name.

⁵³² “The President's News Conference | June 22, 1972,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-91> (accessed June 13, 2022).

⁵³³ *Ibid.*

Haldeman had already spoken about how to hinder the FBI investigation and just one day after the press conference, the “smoking gun” tape was recorded, where they decided on using the CIA to contain the FBI investigation into the Watergate break-in. These recordings show that Nixon knew about and actively planned the cover-up early on (see V.4).⁵³⁴ This should be kept in mind for all following statements by Nixon and his administration.

During the next two press conferences held on June 29 and July 27, no questions on Watergate were asked by correspondents. Nixon started his August 29 press conference without an opening statement, directly going to the questions of which one was on Watergate. A journalist asked Nixon about his view on the appointment of a special prosecutor. The president argued in a relatively long answer that there were already enough investigations on the matter and a “special prosecutor would [not] serve any useful purpose.” He further stressed that “we are doing everything [...] to investigate it [break-in] and not to cover it up.” Moreover, Nixon confidently stated that

We have cooperated completely. We have indicated that we want all the facts brought out and that as far as any people who are guilty are concerned, they should be prosecuted.

This kind of activity [...] has no place whatever in our political process. We want the air cleared. We want it cleared as soon as possible.⁵³⁵

Although this answer could not have been further from the truth, it again was convincing for correspondents as there were no further questions on the Watergate affair.

The next press conference did not take place until October 5, and Nixon again began without an opening statement. He was asked only one question on Watergate. This time, the question by the correspondent was already asked in a more provocative tone:

Mr. President, don't you think that your Administration and the public would be served considerably and that the men under indictment would be treated better, if you people would come through and make a clean breast about what you were trying to get done at the Watergate?⁵³⁶

In his answer, Nixon stated that he “always” wondered “why anybody would have tried to get anything out of the Watergate,” yet that he did not know about the break-in. The correspondent interrupted Nixon, with a challenging “But, surely you know now, sir,” to which the president gave an evasive answer. Nixon stressed that there had been an

⁵³⁴ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 20–21.

⁵³⁵ “The President's News Conference | August 29, 1972,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-90> (accessed June 13, 2022).

⁵³⁶ “The President's News Conference | October 05, 1972,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-93> (accessed June 15, 2022).

extensive FBI investigation with “133 agents[,] [...] 1,800 leads[...] [and] 1,500 interviews.” He thought the effort was adequate but, “it is now time to have the judicial process go forward.”⁵³⁷ He did not answer the actual question and steered the topic towards the more preferable topic of an extensive investigation now having found the culprits.

During those press conferences, Nixon already used strategies, he would continue to use or intensify over the course of the next two years. He used evasive answers on questions he did not like to answer or stated to not comment on ongoing investigations but also told straight-out lies. One might wonder why there were only three questions related to Watergate during press conferences since the break-in. That the investigations of the break-in had not yet progressed enough is not a sufficient explanation. By October, there had already been enough links established between the break-in and the White House that could have led to more media interest.⁵³⁸ Yet, the media did not trust Nixon to commit such illegal activities. Moreover, it is important to understand that during this time the media was not yet as suspicious of politicians. Indeed, a major factor that has led to the media becoming more skeptical of politicians and taking a more investigative approach was the Watergate scandal (see III.1.2 and III.2).

Press Conferences After Reelection

After his reelection in November 1972 until his resignation in August 1974, Nixon held a total of nine press conferences. During his first press conference after his reelection, Nixon was not asked on Watergate. However, as the investigations started to produce more results from March 1973 on, many more questions were asked during the following press conferences.

The president started his March 2, 1973, press conference with a very short opening statement not connected to Watergate. In the subsequent question-and-answer part, Nixon received two questions related to Watergate. The first one is in hindsight very surprising as it seems like the correspondent believed the Watergate case was over after Gordon Liddy, Howard Hunt and the five burglars had been found guilty:

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Bonnie Berkowitz and Dylan Moriarty, “How the Watergate Scandal Broke to the World: A Visual Timeline,” *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/interactive/2022/timeline-watergate-scandal-revelations/> (accessed November 28, 2022).

Mr. President, now that the Watergate case is over, the trial is over, could you give us your view on the verdict and what implications you see in the verdict on public confidence in the political system?⁵³⁹

This questions perfectly represents the idea of the importance of the Watergate break-in in much of the media until mid-March 1973. Nixon reminded the correspondent that the case “is not over” and he would thus not comment on it. However, he added that besides the judicial cases, the Congressional committee under Senator Ervin was continuing its investigation and if the investigation was carried out “in an even-handed way,” the White House “will, of course, cooperate with the committee.”⁵⁴⁰

Yet, on the next question, Nixon in a way contradicted his own statement. A correspondent wanted to know whether he would object to Counsel Dean testifying before the Congressional committee. The president’s response was clear: “Of course.” When the correspondent inquired about the reason, Nixon brought up executive privilege:

No President could ever agree to allow the Counsel to the President to go down and testify before a committee.

On the other hand, as far as any committee of the Congress is concerned, where information is requested that a member of the White House Staff may have, we will make arrangements to provide that information, but members of the White House Staff, in that position at least, cannot be brought before a Congressional committee in a formal hearing for testimony. I stand on the same position there that every President has stood on.⁵⁴¹

Nixon furthermore told correspondents that he would provide a statement on his position on executive privilege within the next week and a half. Nixon stayed true to his promise and released the statement on executive privilege on March 12 (see V.4).⁵⁴² From this point in time, executive privilege would turn into a highly debated subject and come up directly or indirectly during several press conferences.

Two weeks later, Nixon held his next press conference. Although he did not touch on Watergate in his relatively long opening statement, the first two questions were about it, as were nearly half of all the questions, reflecting the increased interest of the media in the issue.⁵⁴³

⁵³⁹ “The President's News Conference | March 02, 1976,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-82> (accessed June 21, 2022).

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ “The President's News Conference | March 15, 1973,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-85> (accessed June 21, 2022).

The first two questions were again on whether Nixon would let John Dean testify in some way. Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray had disclosed to having shared FBI reports on Watergate with him, making the former White House Counsel a highly interesting witness for the Committee (see V.4).⁵⁴⁴

Nixon – in a long answer – referencing the separation of powers and arguing that his administration had “been more forthcoming in terms of the relationship between the executive, the White House, and the Congress, than any administration in [...] [his] memory,” reiterated that he would not let Dean testify. He emphasized his standpoint on Dean in his answer to the second question. Nixon stressed that Dean “will be completely forthcoming – something that other administrations have totally refused to do until we got here.”⁵⁴⁵ With this answer he contradicted his first statement. Later during the press conference, another correspondent tried again, though more general:

Mr. President, does your offer to cooperate with the Ervin committee include the possibility that you would allow your aides to testify before his committee? And if it does not, would you be willing to comply with a court order, if Ervin went to court to get one, that required some testimony from White House aides?⁵⁴⁶

In his answer, the president referred to his statement on executive privilege and declared that “members of the White House Staff will not appear before a committee of Congress in any formal session.” Moreover, Nixon stated “if the Senate feels that they want a court test, we would welcome it,” feeling sure that his side would win.⁵⁴⁷

One correspondent wanted to know whether Nixon was “concerned [...] that any of the confidential FBI interviews that were conducted in their Watergate investigation were in any way compromised by Pat Gray's having given information to John Dean or talked with John Ehrlichman or others?” In his answer Nixon did what he had done many times before. He portrayed himself and his administration in a good light but expressed concern about others. Nixon argued that he was not worried that such confidential information would get public after it was handled by his staff, yet showed concern that confidential information would get public through the Committee.⁵⁴⁸

As Nixon had frequently brought up in his answers to various questions on the committee and the Watergate case, his role in and handling of the Alger Hiss case as an exemplary handling of such an investigation, a correspondent asked him:

⁵⁴⁴ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 28.

⁵⁴⁵ “The President's News Conference | March 15, 1973.”

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

Isn't there an essential difference really between your investigation of the Hiss case and the request of this subcommittee to Mr. Dean to appear? In the former, foreign affairs was involved and possibly security matters, where here they only wish to question Mr. Dean about the breaking into the Watergate?⁵⁴⁹

With the question, the correspondent wanted to know why it was so problematic to have Dean testify before the committee, indirectly wondering if there was more to it than saving the principle of executive privilege or separation of powers. In his answer, Nixon displayed the eloquence of the trained lawyer he was:

I would say the difference is very significant. As a matter of fact, when a committee of Congress was investigating espionage against the Government of this country, that committee should have had complete cooperation from at least the executive branch of the Government in the form that we asked. All that we asked was to get the report that we knew they had already made of their investigation.

Now, this investigation does not involve espionage against the United States. It is, as we know, espionage by one political organization against another. And I would say [...] that the argument would be that the Congress would have a far greater right and would be on much stronger ground to ask the Government to cooperate in a matter involving espionage against the Government than in a matter like this involving politics.⁵⁵⁰

He simply turned around the argument so that it supported his standpoint. In all his answers to Watergate-related questions, Nixon stayed polite and did not attack the media. Though, he steered his answers towards topics he preferred to talk about or portrayed himself and his administration favorably.

Up to and including March 1973, the press conferences proceeded without much tension. It would be over five months until Nixon held his next press conference on August 22, 1973, which took place in California and was live broadcast on national television and radio.⁵⁵¹ Since his last conference, there had been many new developments in the Watergate investigations. Among other developments, Nixon had fired two important advisors (Haldeman, Ehrlichman), the public hearings of the committee had begun, and Alexander Butterfield had told the nation about the taping system (see V.4). These findings led to much more media interest, which can also be seen in the fact that more than half of all questions asked concerned Watergate, and those questions were more probing than during prior conferences. Interestingly, Nixon did not mention Watergate or the

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid. Information on the Alger Hiss case can be found in Chapter V.1.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ "The President's News Conference | August 22, 1973," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-87> (accessed June 24, 2022).

investigations in his opening statement but only talked about the replacement for Secretary of State William Rogers. Yet, the first seven questions of the press conference were connected to the Watergate investigations, indicating the interest of the media in the topic.⁵⁵²

Correspondent Frances L. Lewine from the *Associated Press* wanted to know why Nixon did tape conversations if their disclosure – according to the president – might “jeopardize and cripple the functions of the Presidency?” Nixon argued it was for a future accurate record (e.g., on national security issues) “but a record which would only be disclosed at the discretion of the President.”⁵⁵³

Another correspondent asked Nixon whether he did “at any time during the Watergate crisis [...] consider resigning” or if he would consider it when he thought that his “capacity to govern had been seriously weakened.”⁵⁵⁴ However, it is not the answer of Nixon to the actual questions that is most interesting here, but what Nixon chose to bring up during his answer:

It is true that as far as the capacity to govern is concerned, that to be under a constant barrage – 12 to 15 minutes a night on each of the three major networks for 4 months – tends to raise some questions in the people's mind with regard to the President, and it may raise some questions with regard to the capacity to govern. [...]

The point that I make now is that we are proceeding as best we know how to get all those guilty brought to justice in Watergate. But now we must move on from Watergate to the business of the people, and the business of the people is continuing with initiatives we began in the first Administration.⁵⁵⁵

He complained that the first half hour of the conference had passed and he had “yet to have, for example, one question on the business of the people.” The president further argued that it

shows you how we are consumed with this. I am not criticizing the members of the press, because you naturally are very interested in this issue, [...] And when you say, do I consider resigning, the answer is no, I shall not resign. I have 3 1/2 years to go.⁵⁵⁶

This answer is very telling as it shows that Nixon was annoyed by the media’s focus on Watergate, arguing that the topic was given too much attention and consuming too much of his time. Moreover, he blamed the media for not focusing enough on what was important

⁵⁵² Ibid.

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

to the people. This theme was again brought up later during the conference but also frequently in the coming year. Nixon explained that he believed “some political figures, some members of the press, perhaps, some members of the television” were focusing on Watergate “in order to keep [...] [him] from doing his job” properly and then fail as president. He further added that “I am sure the fair-minded members of this press corps – and that is most of you – will report when I do well, and I am sure you will report when I do badly.”⁵⁵⁷ However, there were also a couple of lighter moments during the press conference when Nixon joked and the correspondents laughed.⁵⁵⁸

Two weeks later, Nixon held his next press conference. Even though in the meantime Judge Sirica had subpoenaed several tapes for a private review to which the president declined to comply, Nixon did not mention Watergate in his very long opening statement.⁵⁵⁹ Thus, many questions on the tapes came up during the September 5th press conference. Overall, nearly half of the about a dozen questions asked were connected to Watergate, four related to the court decision on the tapes and the content of the tapes.⁵⁶⁰

As Nixon had stated before that he “would abide only by a definitive ruling of the Supreme Court,” correspondent Tom Jarriel from *ABC News* wanted to know what the president considered a “definitive ruling.” Nixon denied answering and argued that him discussing the matter “in advance of the discussion, the briefs, the oral argument [...] would be inappropriate.” The president then quickly called on correspondent Dan Rather from *CBS News*.⁵⁶¹ However, Rather followed up on his colleague, which the president commented with “it shows the two networks working together,” indicating discontent with the topic. He asked Nixon:

As you know, President Lincoln said, ‘No man is above the law.’ Now, for most, if not every other American, any Supreme Court decision is final, whether the person, in terms of the decision, finds it definitive or not. Would you explain to us why you feel that you are in a different category, why, as it applies to you, that you will abide only by what you call a definitive decision and that you won't even define ‘definitive?’⁵⁶²

Nixon again evaded the answer and stuck to his message. He reiterated that his objections were based on separation of power and executive privilege. Concerning a Supreme Court decision, Nixon argued that “it would not be appropriate [...] to comment on whether an

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 46.

⁵⁶⁰ “The President's News Conference | September 05, 1973,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-89> (accessed June 28, 2022).

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

order would be definitive or not.” He stressed that he would be ready to appeal the case as far as necessary.⁵⁶³

A little later during the press conference, a correspondent came back to a point Nixon made in a prior answer and wanted to know whether Nixon could guarantee “that the tapes do not reflect unfavorably on your Watergate position.”⁵⁶⁴ Nixon stated:

There is nothing whatever in the tapes that is inconsistent with the statement that I made on May 22 or of the statement that I made to you ladies and gentlemen in answer to several questions – rather searching questions I might say, and very polite questions 2 weeks ago, for the most part – and finally, nothing that differs whatever from the statement that I made on the 15th of August.⁵⁶⁵

But what Nixon claimed was not true, and he later had to resign due to it. It is interesting that he did not use his evasive tactics in answering this question but chose to tell lies. Maybe he felt the need to give a definite statement on it or he thought the truth would never come out. However, even more interesting is the fact that Nixon stated that the press had “searching questions” and “for the most part” was polite “2 weeks ago.” This shows that Nixon realized that the media asked more and more critical questions on Watergate. And he did not appreciate it. When, at the end of the press conference, a correspondent wanted to ask another question on the tapes and the Supreme Court, Nixon complained “that’s the fifth one,” however he let the correspondent ask his question.⁵⁶⁶ During the press conference, Nixon was also asked by Richard Valeriani from *NBC News* on his take on the current confidence of the public in his leadership:

It is rather difficult to have the President of the United States on [...] television [...] for 4 months [...] by innuendo, by leak, by, frankly, leers and sneers of commentators, which is their perfect right, attacked in every way without having some of that confidence being worn away.

Now, how is it restored? Well, it is restored by the President not allowing his own confidence to be destroyed; that is to begin. And second, it is restored by doing something. We have tried to do things. The country hasn't paid a great deal of attention to it, and I may say the media hasn't paid a great deal of attention to it because your attention, quite understandably, is in the more fascinating area of Watergate.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid. Actually it was the sixth question connected to Watergate. Nixon might have counted wrong or not counted the follow-up question by Dan Rather.

[...] the people will be concerned about what the President does, and I think that that will restore the confidence. What the president says will not restore it, and what you ladies and gentlemen say will certainly not restore it.⁵⁶⁷

In his answer Nixon criticized the media for their reporting and showed that he was annoyed by the coverage of Watergate. He saw the media as the major cause for a decline in the public's trust in his leadership, not his actions. This answer again played on the regularly used theme of the media focusing too much on Watergate and not enough on the important issues of the nation.

Nixon's next press conference on October 3 hardly touched Watergate with only one question asked on the topic. The question again was on the tapes but did not shine a new light on the issue as Nixon gave a similar answer to what he had stated prior: he would not comment on the case as long as it was discussed in court, his focus being on maintaining the separation of power and executive privilege.⁵⁶⁸

However, the following press conference on October 26 became more interesting as in the meantime several developments had caused turmoil. Vice President Agnew had had to resign and on October 20 Nixon had gotten rid of Special Prosecutor Cox (Saturday Night Massacre). The White House was suddenly confronted with bills demanding impeachment investigations and highly critical media coverage (see V.4).⁵⁶⁹

The backlash of the media was very noticeable during the press conference. In his opening statement Nixon discussed at length developments in the Middle East but also shortly talked about the tapes and the plan to appoint a new special prosecutor. He managed to set the agenda with these topics for the press conference, however, the mix of question was probably not as he would have liked. Out of the 16 questions asked, three-quarters were on Watergate and already the first one was on a new special prosecutor.⁵⁷⁰

In most cases Nixon answered evasively but stayed neutral. However, some interactions between the president and the correspondents stood out, in particular due to their frequency during this press conference. The first of such interactions came up during a question about the public's confidence in the president. In his answer, Nixon again played on the theme of the exaggerated focus of the media on Watergate. He stated that he had not encountered "such outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting in 27 years of public life" and asserted that

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ "The President's News Conference | October 03, 1973," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-83> (accessed June 29, 2022).

⁵⁶⁹ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 47–51.

⁵⁷⁰ "The President's News Conference | October 26, 1973."

“when people are pounded night after night with that kind of frantic, hysterical reporting, it naturally shakes their confidence.”⁵⁷¹

On Jerald F. terHorst’s (*Detroit News*) question on how Nixon handled “the stress of recent events” by the president – besides stating that he handled the stress well – again went after the media’s reporting, this time even stronger. He claimed that the media reported stories that they knew were false. “But as far as I am concerned, I have learned to expect it,” he concluded.⁵⁷²

Nixon’s cumulative attacks on the media and in particular the TV networks did not stay unnoticed by the correspondents. Robert C. Pierpoint of *CBS* responded to the side blows of the president by asking him:

Mr. President, you have lambasted the television networks pretty well. Could I ask you, at the risk of reopening an obvious wound, you say after you have put on a lot of heat that you don't blame anyone. I find that a little puzzling. What is it about the television coverage of you in these past weeks and months that has so aroused your anger?⁵⁷³

This question led to an intriguing exchange. Nixon answered: “Don't get the impression that you arouse my anger,” which caused laughter by the correspondents. Pierpoint’s response caused laughter as well: “I'm afraid, sir, that I have that impression,” to which Nixon replied with an astounding statement: “You see, one can only be angry with those he respects.”⁵⁷⁴ The video recording shows a big smile on Nixon’s face after he said this. There is a short silence of astonishment by the correspondents.⁵⁷⁵ Nixon’s statement not only reflected the anger and connected pressure he must have felt regarding the media coverage on Watergate but also his general attitude towards the media. The president somewhat backpaddled in his response to the next question where he added at the end:

I didn't want to leave an impression with my good friend from CBS over here that I don't respect the reporters. What I was simply saying was this: that when a commentator takes a bit of news and then, with knowledge of what the facts are, distorts it, viciously, I have no respect for that individual.⁵⁷⁶

The president tried to soften his prior statement by limiting the group he lacked respect for to media representatives who intentionally reported false news. But the damage was already done. That the tension between the president and the media was continuously rising

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ “Nixon Insults the Press | October 26, 1973 | Video,” *Vikash YouTube Channel*, July 22, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iucE78-C2Po> (accessed November 28, 2022), 00:37-00:55.

⁵⁷⁶ “The President's News Conference | October 26, 1973.”

can also be seen in the question that followed. Clark Mollenhoff from the *Des Moines Register and Tribune* tried to get Nixon's attention by shouting "Mr. President!" to which Nixon replied: "You are so loud, I will have to take you." Mollenhoff countered: "I have to be, because you happen to dodge my questions all of the time." Furthermore, he posed his question in a quite challenging manner:

Last May, you went before the American people, and you said executive privilege will not be invoked as to any testimony concerning possible criminal conduct or discussing of possible criminal conduct, including the Watergate affair and the alleged coverup.

If you have revised or modified this position, as you seem to have done, could you explain the rationale of a law-and-order Administration covering up evidence, prima facie evidence, of high crimes and misdemeanors?⁵⁷⁷

The correspondent correctly highlighted the discrepancy between former statements and current actions, emphasizing his point by alluding to Nixon's law-and-order politics. And by that questioned how all this fits together. Not surprisingly, he did get an edgy answer. Nixon suggested that "perhaps all the other reporters in the room are aware of the fact that we have waived executive privilege on all individuals within the Administration," thus Mollenhoff being the only one unaware, asking a foolish question. Nixon went even further arguing that "it has been the greatest waiver of executive privilege in the whole history of this Nation."⁵⁷⁸ This was a very typical of Nixon who liked to highlight his own greatness and that of his administration in contrast to others (e.g., prior administrations or media reports).

In November 1973, Nixon took part in an hour-long, live broadcast question-and-answer session at the *Annual Convention of the Associated Press Managing Editors Association*. There he gave his now famous quote "I am not a crook," addressing, among other things, questions about the use of taxpayer money for luxury renovations of his homes and his income taxes:

I want to say this to the television audience: I made my mistakes, but in all of my years of public life, I have never profited, never profited from public service – I have earned every cent. And in all of my years of public life, I have never obstructed justice. And I think, too, that I could say that in my years of public life, that I welcome this kind of examination, because people have got to know whether or not their President is a crook. Well, I am not a crook. I have earned everything I have got.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁹ "Question-and-Answer Session at the Annual Convention of the Associated Press Managing Editors Association, Orlando, Florida | November 17, 1973," *The American Presidency Project*,

Besides the validity of this statement, which would come to haunt him later, it is very interesting that Nixon directly addressed the audience at home (which he did several times during the Q&A), making clear that this was not only an event for the media but also highly important for Nixon to portray himself to the public as he wanted to be portrayed. In this case, he achieved two objectives simultaneously: He got his point across with the media but at the same time circumvented the media and directly talked to the audience. How he defended himself against accusations and used television to reach the American public is reminiscent of his Checkers speech.

There were several instances where one can see that Nixon also had the public in mind. He at times gave very elaborate answers and explained issues important to him in much detail. Nixon was also confident and had his answers ready, which made him look like a decisive leader. Surely there were times where he might have looked a little aggressive or displeased with a question. For instance, the question “Do you feel that the executive privilege is absolute?” caused Nixon to first look astonished. After a short, perplexed pause, a hand gesture that indicates surprise, followed by crossing of his arms, he said “I, of course, do not,” and then went on to explain it further.⁵⁸⁰ As such moments did not turn into a heated exchange between him and the media, they did not cast Nixon in a negative light. Moreover, he joked very frequently, which caused the media members to laugh. All of this was transmitted live to the audience at home, and he could use the event not only as a forum to interact with the media but also to go around the media, directly to the public.⁵⁸¹ It took until February 25, 1974, that Nixon held another press conference. In contrast to the last press conference, there were no such heated exchanges between Nixon and correspondents on the Watergate matter. Nixon tried to steer the topic to the energy crisis, for instance with his opening statement, but calmly answered the questions on Watergate.⁵⁸² Just a bit over a week later, on March 6, Nixon held another press conference, which would also be the last one of his presidency. Out of the overall 19 questions asked

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/question-and-answer-session-the-annual-convention-the-associated-press-managing-editors> (accessed July 6, 2022).

⁵⁸⁰ “Richard Nixon Associated Press Q and A Session 1973 | November 17, 1973 | Video,” *Buyout Footage Historic Film Archive YouTube Channel*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqPAixaBFOQ> (accessed November 28, 2022), 40:44-43:25.

⁵⁸¹ “Question-and-Answer Session at the Annual Convention of the Associated Press Managing Editors Association, Orlando, Florida | November 17, 1973”; “Richard Nixon Associated Press Q and A Session 1973 | November 17, 1973 | Video.”

⁵⁸² “The President’s News Conference | February 25, 1974,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-80> (accessed July 6, 2022).

by correspondents, 15 were connected to the Watergate affair. Nixon did not address Watergate in his short opening statement, but the first question was already on the issue.⁵⁸³ According to the transcript, it was a press conference with a normal atmosphere. The journalists kept asking more specific and investigative questions, with several follow-ups, but phrased their questions politely. And on two of the Watergate questions the transcript shows an indication of laughter after Nixon joking, thus the atmosphere seemed not to be very tense.⁵⁸⁴ One correspondent voiced the surprise of the press corps that Nixon held a press conference shortly after his last one, asking Nixon whether “that is the start of a new policy” and added a second unrelated question. Nixon did not answer the first part and only the unrelated question, however, it is unclear whether he simply forgot or intended to do so.⁵⁸⁵ Yet, this question reflected Nixon’s infrequent press conferences and a wish by the press corps to have more possibilities to meet the president.

In his answer to a different question, Nixon showed that he was aware of the television and radio audience watching and listening to the live broadcast. The president stated that

when you refer to a narrow view of what is an impeachable crime, I would say that might leave in the minds of some of our viewers and listeners a connotation which would be inaccurate. It is the constitutional view. The Constitution is very precise.⁵⁸⁶

He made sure to stress that his view of an impeachable offense was the right one, supported by the Constitution.⁵⁸⁷ In doing so, Nixon went around the media and in particular by directly mentioning and addressing the public, he brought his views to the people following the broadcast.

In addition, Nixon did deliver a side blow to the media and the committee in one of his answers. He argued that his former aides Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Colson had already been convicted by the media and the committee before anything had been proven in court, but that he and the public would not do that:

⁵⁸³ “The President's News Conference | March 06, 1974,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-81> (accessed July 6, 2022).

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁷ In fact, the Constitution is not as precise on impeachable offences as Nixon made it sound. The U.S. Constitution states in Article II, Section 4 that “The President, Vice President and all civil Officers of the United States, shall be removed from Office on Impeachment for, and Conviction of, Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors.” There is disagreement on the interpretation of this article to whether a criminal offense is a requirement for impeachment. According to the majority of scholars the phrase “high Crimes and Misdemeanors” has to be interpreted as not to require a criminal offense for impeachment. Yet, Nixon preferred the interpretation with a criminal offense as it represents a greater hurdle. This line of argumentation was, for instance, brought up again when President Trump was impeached.

While they have been convicted in the press over and over again, while they have been convicted before committees over and over again, they are now before a court, and they are entitled to, they will receive from me and, I think, from every fair-minded American the presumption of innocence that any individual is entitled to.⁵⁸⁸

Here again, Nixon would bring up the theme of his “good” administration versus the “bad” other (media, committee, etc.). Besides this statement there were no further side blows or even direct confrontations between the media and the president during this press conference.

Overall, Nixon would frequently give evasive answers where he would circumnavigate the posed question, say as little as possible, or talk about issues he preferred to talk about. Another strategy of the president was to simply deny answering, arguing that it would not be wise to comment on the issue at the moment or that he would not go into details due to ongoing investigations. Nixon also had certain themes he brought up frequently. He, for example, repeatedly argued that there were more important issues than Watergate. It is noteworthy that he would only at times use opening statements to try and steer the press conferences’ topics as he held many with little or no statement at the beginning. But from March 1973 on, when the media started to become more critical, he used them for every subsequent press conference. What stands out most are his frequent lies about his and his administration’s knowledge and involvement in the Watergate affair.

Generally, the exchanges between Nixon and correspondents stayed polite as they let each other finish their sentences and the atmosphere was typically neutral. At times the president made jokes and correspondents laughed. Yet, there were several sharp exchanges which showed the tension between the two parties. The deeper the investigations in the Watergate affair went, the more the media became interested, and correspondents started not to only ask more, but also more critical and investigative questions. The latter followed up on Nixon’s answers or came back to the same issue more often, not being content with the answers he had given. Nixon would not hold back his dissatisfaction with the questioning and the corresponding amount of reporting on Watergate and more frequently and openly criticized the media for the coverage, again arguing that the media did not focus on what was really important to the people. He also frequently brought up this argument in his addresses (see V.4.2).

⁵⁸⁸ “The President’s News Conference | March 06, 1974.”

Nixon's last press conference was in March 1973, five months before his resignation in August. He successfully evaded the media's questioning when his situation came to a head and the pressure to assert his (non-existent) innocence ever rose. The president would then opt for a different tool, circumventing the media through televised addresses. In April 1974 and again in August 1974, he spoke directly to the people.

4.2 Television During Watergate

Contrary to the press conferences, addresses to the nation were an unfiltered way to the American public without direct interference by the media. They allowed Nixon to try to convince the viewer of his opinion and thoughts on specific issues by bringing them directly to the viewer's living room. Nixon used this tool four times in connection with Watergate and first resorted to it when the pressure of the investigation had started to rise in 1973.⁵⁸⁹

Address to the Nation About the Watergate Investigations, April 30, 1973

By the end of April 1973, Nixon realized that he had to dissociate himself from his aides who became increasingly embroiled in the Watergate affair. The resignations of the aids and of the attorney general were announced on April 30, 1973, with a live-broadcast address to the nation by Nixon. This was the first time he directly addressed the public on Watergate.⁵⁹⁰

Nixon started his address by recapping what had happened during the Watergate scandal, in particular what actions he had taken according to his account at specific times.⁵⁹¹ He then announced the resignations and talked about the new attorney general. In this context, the president stressed the trustworthiness of himself and the Office of the Presidency, directly addressing the audience:

Whatever may appear to have been the case before, whatever improper activities may yet be discovered in connection with this whole sordid affair, I want the American people, I want you to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that during my term as President, justice will be

⁵⁸⁹ Besides the four addresses, Nixon's televised good-by to staff on his last day in office is also analyzed in order to include his last use of television during his presidency.

⁵⁹⁰ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 33–34.

⁵⁹¹ Several of Nixon's official statements and claims concerning the Watergate scandal would later be proven to be lies.

pursued fairly, *fully, and impartially, no matter who is involved. This office is a sacred trust and I am determined to be worthy of that trust.*⁵⁹²

Whilst he said this, the camera zoomed in further on Nixon and at the italicized passages, he looked straight into the camera with a focus that it feels like he is looking one directly in the eyes.⁵⁹³ Focusing the camera was a deliberate action, as it contrasted with the frequent brief glances up from the notes in front of him. It had the intention of giving each viewer the feeling of a personal promise by the president.

The president indirectly rejected the blame for illegal activities as he then implied that they had happened as while he had not run his own campaign but had delegated it. He stressed that his campaign had been run by someone else as his responsibilities as president were more important than his reelection bid.⁵⁹⁴

Nixon further brought up the theme that also frequently came up during his press conferences. The focus should now be changed to other issues as “the Watergate affair [...] has claimed far too much of my time and my attention.” Instead, he wanted to devote his “full attention [...] again to the larger duties of this office” and instantly went into detail about the domestic and foreign policies, he deemed important.⁵⁹⁵

The president concluded his address with an appeal to the people at home:

I looked at my own calendar this morning up at Camp David as I was working on this speech. It showed exactly 1,361 days remaining in my term. I want these to be the *best* days in America's history, because I love America. I deeply believe that America is the hope of the world. And I know that in the quality and wisdom of the leadership America gives lies the only hope for millions of people all over the world that they can live their lives in peace and freedom. We must be worthy of that hope, in every sense of the word. Tonight, I ask for your prayers to help me in everything that I do throughout the days of my Presidency to be worthy of their hopes and of yours.

God bless America and God bless each and every one of you.⁵⁹⁶

At the italicized word, the camera zoomed out, showing – besides other things – the American flag, making it look less intimate and more official. For the last sentence, Nixon

⁵⁹² Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation About the Watergate Investigations | April 30, 1973,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-about-the-watergate-investigations-0> (accessed July 27, 2022). The italics were added by the author.

⁵⁹³ Richard M. Nixon, “April 30, 1973: Address to the Nation About the Watergate Investigations | Video,” *Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/april-30-1973-address-nation-about-watergate-investigations> (accessed November 29, 2022), 08:00-08:39. To what extent the camera work could be determined by the White House is unclear. However, it is noticeable that it was adapted to Nixon’s speech.

⁵⁹⁴ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation About the Watergate Investigations | April 30, 1973.”

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.* The italics were added by the author.

again looked straight into the camera, already having put aside his notes, which again made it feel as the president talked directly to the viewer.⁵⁹⁷

Until his next address, Alexander Butterfield's confirmation of the existence of the tape-recording system, had the committee and Archibald Cox request the tapes. But the president refused to hand them over.⁵⁹⁸

Address to the Nation About the Watergate Investigations August 9, 1973

Nixon began his second address with explaining that he wanted "to provide a perspective on the issue for the American people" or as he said later during his address, "I shall attempt to put the events in perspective from the standpoint of the Presidency."⁵⁹⁹ In contrast to his first address this one was more strongly worded. Nixon began it with a criticism of the amount of reporting on Watergate, the committee's amount of testimony and the alleged aim to implicate Nixon:

For over 4 months, Watergate has dominated the news media. During the past 3 months, the three major networks have devoted an average of over 22 hours of television time each week to this subject. The Senate committee has heard over 2 million words of testimony.

This investigation began as an effort to discover the facts about the break-in and bugging of the Democratic National Headquarters and other campaign abuses.

But as the weeks have gone by, it has become clear that both the hearings themselves and some of the commentaries on them have become increasingly absorbed in an effort to implicate the President personally in the illegal activities that took place.⁶⁰⁰

Here Nixon again brought up the theme that the media put too much focus on Watergate, however, this time implying that the media and the committee intended to implicate him. In the next part Nixon again stated what he (according to him) knew about Watergate, when he had become aware of issues and what he had done about them. In this context, the president also made this unmistakable statement: "I neither took part in nor knew about any of the subsequent coverup activities." This would later turn out to have been a lie.⁶⁰¹ He furthermore defended his stance on the tapes. Arguing that the conversations of the president need to be confidential so that he can "talk openly and candidly with his

⁵⁹⁷ Richard M. Nixon, "April 30, 1973: Address to the Nation About the Watergate Investigations | Video," 22:41–24:11.

⁵⁹⁸ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 41,43- 44, 46.

⁵⁹⁹ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation About the Watergate Investigations | August 15, 1973," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-about-the-watergate-investigations> (accessed August 9, 2022).

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid. To date, there is no evidence that Nixon ordered the break-in, but he was demonstrably involved in the cover-up.

advisers.” Therefore, the reason for not handing over the tapes was not their content concerning Watergate, but Nixon’s honorable defense of the principle of confidentiality and thus, in a broader sense the presidency.⁶⁰²

As during his first address, Nixon called for the focus be shifted away from Watergate towards what he thought were more important issues, and he did so by directly addressing the viewers:

Let me turn now to an issue that is important above all else and that is critically affecting your life today and will affect your life and your children's life in the years to come.

After twelve weeks and two million words of televised testimony, we have reached a point at which a continued, backward looking [sic!] obsession with Watergate is causing this Nation to neglect matters of far greater importance to all of the American people.

We must not stay so mired in Watergate that we fail to respond to challenges of surpassing importance to America and the world. We cannot let an obsession with the past destroy our hopes for the future.⁶⁰³

The already mentioned combative style appeared several times throughout the speech, for instance when the president described the investigation and connected reporting as a “backward looking [sic!] obsession” or “an obsession with the past [that would] destroy our hopes for the future.” With these strong words, Nixon juxtaposed America’s political challenges with a seemingly overblown Watergate, making the case for moving on to the issues that truly affected his viewers and listeners.

Nixon ended his address with the following:

I ask for your help to ensure that those who would exploit Watergate in order to keep us from doing what we were elected to do will not succeed.

[...]

I ask for your help in reaffirming our dedication to the principles of decency, honor, and respect for the institutions that have sustained our progress through these past two centuries. And I ask for your support in getting on once again with meeting your problems, improving your life, building your future.

With your help, with God's help, we will achieve those great goals for America.

Thank you and good evening⁶⁰⁴

The president appealed for the public’s help, by directly addressing them. By doing so he made full use of the medium television and its strengths. Nixon tried to reach the Americans in their living rooms and create a more personal relationship by addressing

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

them directly, without the media filtering or assessing his words. For a president who was trying to distance himself from a scandal that had already come close to him and tarnished his reputation, this was extremely valuable. His appeal to the public also seemed successful. His approval rating at the beginning of August was 31 percent, in a poll conducted from August 17th to 20th it had increased to 38 percent.⁶⁰⁵

Two weeks after the address, Judge Sirica subpoenaed several tapes for a private review, but as with the requests by the committee and Cox, the White House did not comply.⁶⁰⁶

Address to the Nation Announcing Answer to the House Judiciary Committee Subpoena for Additional Presidential Tape Recordings April 29, 1974

Since the last address, the Saturday Night Massacre had happened, and media coverage had turned extremely negative.⁶⁰⁷ Moreover, the House had voted to launch an impeachment inquiry in February 1974.⁶⁰⁸ On April 29, the White House made over 1,000 pages of edited transcripts of the tapes available, thereby trying to avoid handing out the requested additional tapes. The same day, Nixon held his third address to the nation on the Watergate investigations.⁶⁰⁹ It was live broadcast via radio and television at 9 p.m. The president was sitting in the Oval Office and next to him were several stacked folders that supposedly contained the transcripts.⁶¹⁰

Nixon began by reiterating what he knew and had done since the break-in, claiming his innocence on all allegations. After about two and a half minutes Nixon turned to the issue of the tapes. The camera zoomed out, and for the first time during the address the television audience could see the large stack of folders on a table next to the president, while Nixon explained what could be found in the transcripts. The imagery of the many folders stacked on top of each other was one of full transparency, since the White House was handing over these many pages of transcripts. Throughout the address the camera would zoom out

⁶⁰⁵ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1972-1977*, 154, 166.

⁶⁰⁶ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 46.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 49–50.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 53–54.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶¹⁰ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Answer to the House Judiciary Committee Subpoena for Additional Presidential Tape Recordings | April 29, 1974,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-announcing-answer-the-house-judiciary-committee-subpoena-for-additional> (accessed August 16, 2022); Richard M. Nixon, “April 29, 1974: Address to the Nation on Presidential Tape Recordings | Video,” *Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/april-29-1974-address-nation-presidential-tape-recordings> (accessed November 29, 2022).

several times so that the folders became visible next to Nixon or switch, so that only the folders were visible, fitting to the words the president uttered in these moments.⁶¹¹

This address was a mixture of Nixon portraying his actions since and the status of his knowledge on the break-in, reasoning around executive privilege, reasons for changing his mind on the publication of the content of the tapes as well as concerns and explanations of details that American would be able to read in the transcripts.⁶¹²

The president also openly criticized the media during his address, accusing them of making false accusations or making speculations look to be facts:

During the past year, the wildest accusations have been given banner headlines and ready credence as well. Rumor, gossip innuendo, accounts from unnamed sources of what a prospective witness might testify to, have filled the morning newspapers and then are repeated on the evening newscasts day after day.

Time and again, a familiar pattern repeated itself. A charge would be reported the first day as what it was – just an allegation. But it would then be referred back to the next day and thereafter as if it were true.

The distinction between fact and speculation grew blurred. Eventually, all seeped into the public consciousness as a vague general impression of massive wrongdoing, implicating everybody, gaining credibility by its endless repetition.⁶¹³

The president not only criticized past media reports but worried about how the content of the transcripts would be used by the media and political opponents, arguing that “certain parts of them will be seized upon by political and journalistic opponents.”⁶¹⁴

The fascinating aspect about such statements by the president in hindsight is that there in fact had been “massive wrongdoing,” and Nixon knew about it and had been part of it – and in the end had to resign because of that. Yet, he continued to argue that he was being mistreated by the media and the investigations and was completely innocent.

As during his prior two addresses, he again argued to move on to the challenges and opportunities the United States currently faced, and addressed his audience:

Every day absorbed by Watergate is a day lost from the work that must be done by your President and by your Congress work that must be done in dealing with the great problems that affect your prosperity, affect your security, that could affect your lives.⁶¹⁵

⁶¹¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Answer to the House Judiciary Committee Subpoena for Additional Presidential Tape Recordings | April 29, 1974”; Richard M. Nixon, “April 29, 1974: Address to the Nation on Presidential Tape Recordings | Video.”

⁶¹² Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Answer to the House Judiciary Committee Subpoena for Additional Presidential Tape Recordings | April 29, 1974.”

⁶¹³ Ibid.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

At the end of his address, Nixon again turned directly to his audience stating:

I was trying [...] to do what was right.

I hope and I trust that when you have seen the evidence in its entirety, you will see the truth of that statement.

As for myself, I intend to go forward, to the best of my ability, with the work that you elected me to do.⁶¹⁶

He concluded his address with a smile on his face, put down his notes, looked straight into the camera, thanked the audience and wished them a good evening.⁶¹⁷

The president had again tried to directly reach Americans, this time preparing them for the publication of the transcripts. He held this address before the transcripts were made public, thus his audience did not yet know what to expect. Nixon tried to steer how Americans would receive the content of the transcripts by giving his assessment before their publication. Unfortunately for him and the White House, this proved to be a difficult task. The racist comments, pure political calculation and profanity in the transcripts shocked the readers.⁶¹⁸ Kutler argued that “the October firestorm [the Saturday Night Massacre] left burning embers; the release of the tape transcripts in April and May rekindled the flames. It was another disaster.”⁶¹⁹ Yet, Nixon would not be able to extinguish the fire.

Address to the Nation Announcing Decision To Resign the Office of President of the United States, August 8, 1974

On July 24, 1974 – over two years after the break-in – the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the president had to hand over all subpoenaed tapes. Among those was the “smoking gun” tape, on which the president and Haldeman talked about using the CIA to contain the FBI investigation into the Watergate break-in. The conversation of June 23, 1972 proved that Nixon knew and approved the cover-up just days after the break-in had happened. This was proof that he had obstructed justice, an impeachable offense which sealed Nixon’s fate. It became clear to the president, “that if he refused to resign, he would be removed from office.”⁶²⁰ Thus, on August 8, 1974, Nixon informed the American public about his decision to resign. At 9:01 p.m., his about 15-minute-long address was live

⁶¹⁶ Ibid.

⁶¹⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “April 29, 1974: Address to the Nation on Presidential Tape Recordings | Video,” 35:08-35:11.

⁶¹⁸ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 54–55.

⁶¹⁹ Stanley I. Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon* (New York, NY: Norton, 1992), 453–54.

⁶²⁰ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 56–59.

broadcast over television and radio from the Oval Office.⁶²¹ About 110 million people watched the president, which was the second largest viewership recorded thus far in U.S. history, only the moon landing had had a bigger audience.⁶²² Nixon began by directly addressing his large audience:

Good evening:

This is the 37th time I have spoken to you from this office, where so many decisions have been made that shaped the history of this Nation. Each time I have done so to discuss with you some matter that I believe affected the national interest.

In all the decisions I have made in my public life, I have always tried to do what was best for the Nation. Throughout the long and difficult period of Watergate, I have felt it was my duty to persevere, to make every possible effort to complete the term of office to which you elected me.⁶²³

The president continued, explaining his change of mind due to his lost support in Congress and then stated:

I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. But as President, I must put the interests of America first. [...]

Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow.⁶²⁴

When stating that he would resign, one can visibly see the agony Nixon was in, also pausing after “therefore.”⁶²⁵ This impression of agony is confirmed by family members and aides who were worried that Nixon would break down during his address. He managed to make it through, but then “was shaky and bathed in sweat.”⁶²⁶

In the further course of the speech, Nixon stated that “if some of my judgments were wrong – and some were wrong,” he made those judgements believing they were in “the best interest of the Nation.”⁶²⁷ This is hardly any acknowledgment for all the illegal actions and all the lies of the two years since the break-in. The president did not own up to all the wrongdoing he was involved in.⁶²⁸

⁶²¹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Decision to Resign the Office of President of the United States | August 8, 1974,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-announcing-decision-resign-the-office-president-the-united-states> (accessed August 22, 2022).

⁶²² “The White House Deathwatch,” *Newsweek*, August 19, 1974, 77–78, 77.

⁶²³ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Decision To Resign the Office of President of the United States | August 8, 1974.”

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁵ Richard M. Nixon, “August 8, 1974: Address to the Nation Announcing Decision to Resign the Office of President | Video,” *Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/august-8-1974-address-nation-announcing-decision-resign-office> (accessed November 29, 2022), 02:34-03:35.

⁶²⁶ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 65.

⁶²⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Decision To Resign the Office of President of the United States | August 8, 1974.”

⁶²⁸ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 64.

As in his prior addresses, Nixon went into detail on his achievements but also challenges lying ahead, now having to be tackled by “the new Administration.”⁶²⁹ Before concluding his address, he looked back, stating that his biggest goal had been “the cause of peace among nations” and that due to his and his administration’s efforts, “the world is a safer place today.” He hoped that this would “be my legacy to you, to our country, as I leave the Presidency.”⁶³⁰ As during his press conferences, Nixon stressed his and his administration’s achievements. But this would not turn out to be what he was most remembered for. Watergate has and likely will always overshadow his political career as Americans strongly disapprove of his actions.

Nixon ended his address with the following:

To have served in this office is to have felt a very personal sense of kinship with each and every American. In leaving it, I do so with this prayer: May God's grace be with you in all the days ahead.⁶³¹

Interestingly, he ended his address with a prayer, not with the usual “good evening” wish. The camera also did not zoom out but zoomed in further to an even closer frame. Together with Nixon looking directly into the camera and directly addressing Americans, this allowed the impression of a more personal good-bye. With that the address ended.⁶³²

A poll taken after the address found that nearly 80 percent thought that the president “should have resigned,” and only 13 percent answered that Nixon “should have stayed.”⁶³³ Thus, the American public was largely relieved.⁶³⁴

At 9:36 a.m. the following day, before leaving the White House, Nixon, surrounded by family members, held a – as he said – “spontaneous” speech in the East Room to say good-bye to administration and White House staff by whom he was greeted with nearly three minutes of applause.⁶³⁵ He could have held this event in private, yet Nixon let television

⁶²⁹ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Decision To Resign the Office of President of the United States | August 8, 1974.”

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

⁶³¹ Ibid.

⁶³² Richard M. Nixon, “August 8, 1974: Address to the Nation Announcing Decision To Resign the Office of President | Video,” 14:58-15:26.

⁶³³ “79% in Poll Back Resignation; 55% Oppose Criminal Inquiry,” *The New York Times*, August 11, 1974, 44.

⁶³⁴ Hillstrom, *Watergate*, 65–66.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 66–67; Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks on Departure from the White House | August 09, 1974,” *The American Presidency Project*, August 9, 1974, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-departure-from-the-white-house> (accessed August 26, 2022); Richard M. Nixon, “President Nixon's Farewell to the White House Staff | August 9, 1974 | Video,” *Richard Nixon Foundation YouTube Channel*, January 17, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32GaowQnGRw> (accessed November 29, 2022), 00:11–03:00.

cameras in.⁶³⁶ Nixon's family complained "it was too much [...] that after all the agony television had caused us, its prying eye should be allowed to intrude on this last and most intimate moment of all." Yet, Nixon argued "that's the way it has to be, [...] We owe it to our supporters. We owe it to the people."⁶³⁷ Or as Kutler put it, the president

sensed an opportunity to serve himself and seized the moment. [...] Clearly, Nixon would persist in his unceasing quest for gaining love and understanding from America. Spontaneous? In all likelihood, the occasion had all the spontaneity of a pointillist painting.⁶³⁸

Nixon talked about family memories and claimed that he had "never ducked" responsibility as "the top man" of the administration, which was obviously not true.⁶³⁹ After all, he had tried to conceal his involvement in the cover-up of the Watergate affair for over two years. He furthermore thanked his staff and told them to be proud of the work of the last years.⁶⁴⁰ And he gave them what Kutler called "autobiographical" advice:⁶⁴¹

Always give your best, never get discouraged, never be petty; always remember, others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself.⁶⁴²

The farewell remarks, as his address the day before, seemed to be "designed to impress indelibly the image of Richard Nixon as a man grievously wronged."⁶⁴³ The narrative that everyone was against him, and he was subject to unwarranted accusations ran through his political career. Again and again, he came back to the fact that he had not enriched himself and that he was "not a crook." And thus, also on the last day in office, he could not hold back on it. Even if the real reason for his resignation was quite different.

After his speech, Nixon and his family directly left, with the audience giving a standing ovation. On his way out, the president also smilingly gave a thumbs up to the audience.⁶⁴⁴

The 37th President of the United States made use of addresses to the nation four times concerning the Watergate affair. He would use this tool during the times of higher tension when the investigation had produced stronger links to the White House and the president

⁶³⁶ Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate*, 549.

⁶³⁷ Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, 1087.

⁶³⁸ Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate*, 549.

⁶³⁹ Richard M. Nixon, "Remarks on Departure From the White House | August 09, 1974."

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate*, 550.

⁶⁴² Richard M. Nixon, "Remarks on Departure From the White House | August 09, 1974."

⁶⁴³ Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate*, 549.

⁶⁴⁴ Richard M. Nixon, "President Nixon's Farewell to the White House Staff | August 9, 1974 | Video," 20:38-20:58.

himself. Nixon got skillfully crafted speeches, which allowed the president to present himself in the best possible light. Moreover, the camera work during the addresses fitted to the words the president said by for example zooming in for a more personal part of the speech. Although it is unclear whether this camera work was determined by the White House or by the networks, the impact that it had on the viewers remains the same. In addition, the staging of the addresses was done professionally to portray an image of an innocent and transparent president, as when they placed the many folders with transcripts next to Nixon. Furthermore, Nixon frequently directly addressed the audience, assuring his innocence or asking for their help. In combination, this conveyed a feeling of closeness to the president.

The themes he would bring up during his press conferences also came up during his addresses, first and foremost, his criticism of the media's reporting and his desire to refocus on issues he deemed important for the people. What also stands out both in his addresses and during his press conferences were his frequent straight lies about his knowledge of and involvement in the Watergate affair.

For his last appearance as president on August 9, 1974, Nixon intentionally let television cameras in, wanting to use one last time the power of television to aim for the understanding of the American public. However, it did not work as the public strongly despised his actions.

The two main parts of Nixon's media strategy are clearly visible throughout the analysis of his press conferences and addresses: circumvention and attack of the media. The former, Nixon would achieve in part by using live broadcasts of his press conference, in particular if they were during prime time. But he most significantly managed to bypass the media when speaking to the American public in his addresses. Attacks of the media were included in his addresses and in answers at press conference. Yet, when considering the degree to which the president disliked the media in private, for such close interaction with his "enemy," the press conferences were comparatively civil.

In the end, even the professional portrayal of a wronged president did not help him. The image had been too far from reality, the revelations of his actions had been too grave to be forgiven by the American public, and his presidency had been overshadowed by its lies. No media relationship or new medium could have helped him stay in office.

After his resignation, Nixon wrote several books and tried to undo the damage that Watergate had done to his reputation. To some degree, he managed to do so, however the

Watergate scandal has continued to define his legacy even after his death.⁶⁴⁵ Noteworthy in this context are also the famous interviews with British journalist David Frost. Nixon once again tried to use television to reach the public and restore his reputation. But since Frost was very well prepared, he only partially succeeded.⁶⁴⁶

The Watergate scandal also had a significant impact on the president-media relationship. Not only did the scandal cause mistrust of the media in the presidency but the media also realized that for quite some time they had overlooked the scandal. Consequently, the more cooperative-oriented relationship turned into a more antagonistic one and investigative journalism strongly gained importance in the following year.⁶⁴⁷ However, Part III shows that the change in the relationship was not only caused by Watergate but also by other factors, as the change in the media environment, did do their part.

⁶⁴⁵ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 322.

⁶⁴⁶ The scope of this paper is limited to the presidential period, thus the interviews will not be discussed any further. However, there are clear parallels in Nixon's strategies. For the transcripts of the interviews and further information: Frost-Nixon Interview Collection, Post-Presidential Collection, *RMNL*; David Frost, *Frost/Nixon: Behind the Scenes of the Nixon Interviews* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2007).

⁶⁴⁷ Frantzich, *Presidents and the Media*, 31.

VI. Barack H. Obama

1. Barack H. Obama and the Media

Barack Hussein Obama II was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on August 4, 1961, to an American mother and a Kenyan father.⁶⁴⁸ The young Obama mostly grew up in Hawaii but for about four years lived in Indonesia when his mother moved there with Obama's stepfather. After going to a prestigious school in Hawaii, Obama earned a degree in political science from Columbia University in 1983 and worked for a couple of years as a community organizer in Chicago. In 1988 he went on to study law at Harvard University. During his time at Harvard Law School, Obama became the first African American president and editor-in-chief of the *Harvard Law Review*.⁶⁴⁹

Obama entered politics when he ran for a state senate seat in Illinois in 1995. He served three terms in the state senate before being elected a member of the U.S. Senate in 2005. During his campaign for the senate seat, Obama gave a widely praised keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. With this speech, he showcased his rhetorical and oratory skills, became known throughout the United States and partially paved the way for his presidential bid.⁶⁵⁰

In 2007, he announced his presidential campaign. Over the course of the election process, he successfully employed social media and its networking opportunities in combination with his community organizing skills (see VI.3) and defeated his Republican opponent John McCain in November 2008. On January 20, 2009, he was inaugurated as the 44th president and made history by being the first African American President of the United States.⁶⁵¹

When Obama came into office, he faced the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. To counter the crisis, the Obama administration brought forth major stimulus packages to help the economy. One of Obama's major achievements during his presidency was the passing of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in March 2010, better known as "Obamacare." Although the act had many flaws, it is considered a historical achievement. Several of his predecessors had failed to sign similar reform for generations (for a detailed description see VI.4).⁶⁵²

⁶⁴⁸ In this thesis, the numeric suffix of President Obama's name is omitted to increase readability.

⁶⁴⁹ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 406–8.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 409–11.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 412–15.

⁶⁵² The Editors of Time, *Barack Obama: Eight Years* (New York, NY: Times Books, 2016), 16, 18–19.

Obama's presidency ended on January 20, 2017, after eight years in office.⁶⁵³ He is married to Michelle Obama with whom he has two daughters.⁶⁵⁴

Obama's experience as a politician, his work as an editor of a scientific journal, and his charismatic personality gave hope that he could establish friendly relations with the media.⁶⁵⁵ Yet, he already "stubbed his toe his first week in office." Obama visited the press corps in their working space, exchanged greetings with several reporters and held small talk on their office arrangements. But he was visibly surprised when correspondents started to ask him serious questions, saying "I can't end up visiting with you guys and shaking hands if I'm going to get grilled every time I come down here." On repeated questioning by reporters, Obama said his intention of the visit was "to say hello and introduce" himself. Correspondents in turn were angered that he did not answer their questions.⁶⁵⁶ This exchange is particularly interesting as it seems that Obama's intention had been to get to know the press corps and start off the relationship on a good note with a surprise visit. However, he did not anticipate them asking more than small talk questions and was visibly irritated by that. When evaluating this exchange, Obama should have expected at least one serious question being asked, which would have helped with his reaction. At the same time, the press corps could have stayed with small talk for this one visit, with the intention of using the moment and starting off the relationship with the newly elected president on an easy note. It would have been useful had both sides thought one step ahead.

In contrast to other presidents, Obama – due to his short political career in Washington – had not yet built the trustful relationship that media representatives and lawmakers can establish over the years. Robert Gibbs and Josh Earnest, both press secretaries during the Obama administration, explained that although Obama recognized the institutional relevance of the media, he – at times – did not approve of how the media executed their role. According to Gibbs, the president did "not come naturally to the media game in Washington," which caused some visible irritations in Obama's media interactions.⁶⁵⁷

⁶⁵³ Michael Nelson, "Barack Obama: Life in Brief," *Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/president/obama/life-in-brief> (accessed March 12, 2021).

⁶⁵⁴ Hamilton and Friedman, *Presidents*, 408–9.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 408; Jean E. Smith, "Obama, F.D.R. and Taming the Press."

⁶⁵⁶ Jean E. Smith, "Obama, F.D.R. and Taming the Press"; "Obama Irritated with White House Reporter - 1/22/09 | Video," *brkcmo93 YouTube Channel*, January 23, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zUgAlQt3n0> (accessed November 30, 2022).

⁶⁵⁷ Milligan, "The Presidency and the Press": 26–7. Obama had served only four years as U.S. Senator before becoming the President of the United States. Before his time in Washington, he was a Senator in Illinois for eight years.

Moreover, the new media environment did not contribute to a better relationship. With many different media outlets there was not one deadline for morning or evening news but there were communication requests by the media all day. Obama's former Deputy Press Secretary Bill Burton stated that "this is a time of feeding those newscasts and newspapers but also their newspaper blogs, cable news, their blogs, other specialty blogs, correspondent *Twitters* and various news feeds moving at faster speeds every day."⁶⁵⁸ However, Obama was annoyed by the "breathless, moment by moment, eternal cycle of cable news" and perceived it to be "more about the 'gotcha,'" than about substantive exchange.⁶⁵⁹ These conflicting expectations caused disruptions in the relationship.

Moreover, the administration took issue with the media's desire for as much information as possible and tried to keep information secret. More precisely, it seems to be the never-ending controversy between the Obama administration and the media. According to *The New York Times* journalist David E. Sanger, the Obama administration was "the most closed, control freak administration" he reported on during his career. Reporters who covered the Obama White House stated that often neither the White House Press Office nor officials working in public affairs at other government institutions reacted to repeated attempts to contact them. Moreover, *Politico* reporter Josh Gerstein noted that if reporters worked on something the administration wanted to keep secret, they did not even provide journalists with fundamental facts. The Obama White House denied these charges, arguing that this was the "natural tension" that so far had existed between the media and every administration. Furthermore, The White House repeatedly argued that an effort had been made to make more data available online as well as to accelerate the processing of request made under Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).⁶⁶⁰

Especially the latter was a major point of controversy with journalists. FOIA is a law effective since 1967 that gives "the public the right to request access to records from any federal agency." Its main function is to "keep [...] citizens in the know about their government." Under this law, the government is obliged to reveal requested government information. However, nine exemptions apply where the government can deny the disclosure of federal records. Amongst these exemptions are, for instance, disclosures that

⁶⁵⁸ Kumar, *Managing the President's Message*, 311.

⁶⁵⁹ Milligan, "The Presidency and the Press": 27.

⁶⁶⁰ Leonard Downie, JR. and Sara Rafsky, "The Obama Administration and the Press: Leak Investigations and Surveillance in Post-9/11 America," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, October 11, 2013, <https://cpj.org/reports/2013/10/obama-and-the-press-us-leaks-surveillance-post-911/> (accessed September 17, 2021). Journalists quoted in article.

jeopardize national security or personal privacy.⁶⁶¹ As Obama had promised a more open government during his campaign, he set to work on his second day as president and in a memo on FOIA argued for the “presumption: In the face of doubt, openness prevails.” Obama furthermore wrote that “agencies should adopt a presumption in favor of disclosure” and not only “wait for specific requests from the public.”⁶⁶² Although the Obama administration started with a positive outlook for transparency, this quickly changed. According to a study conducted by the National Security Archive of The George Washington University in 2011, only 49 of the 90 federal agencies had complied with the new requirements, “and some persisting deep problems” still existed.⁶⁶³ As progress concerning changes in the FOIA request procedure was still not satisfactory in 2016, Obama signed the FOIA Improvement Act. The president noted that the agencies had “processed more FOIA requests [...] than ever before,” but the number of requests had increased, and the act was needed to further accelerate the request process.⁶⁶⁴ However, according to *Politico*, as the act contained steps to simplify the procedure of filing a request but no additional funding, the process could be slowed down even further.⁶⁶⁵ Besides the official efforts to improve the FOIA process, administration lawyers belligerently challenged requests. They fought them not only in court but also at the agency level – occasionally on the president’s direct instruction.⁶⁶⁶ During the last year of Obama’s presidency, the administration had spent more money than ever before on responding to FOIA requests and hired more people to process them. At the same time, more people than ever before had been either informed that the requested files could not be located or that access had been denied to them. Moreover, the administration had record legal expenses

⁶⁶¹ “What Is FOIA?,” *United States Department of Justice*, <https://www.foia.gov/about.html> (accessed September 17, 2021).

⁶⁶² Andrew Malcolm, “A Little Secret About Obama's Transparency,” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2010, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-mar-21-la-na-ticket21-2010mar21-story.html> (accessed March 12, 2021); Barack H. Obama, “Memorandum on the Freedom of Information Act | January 21, 2009,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/memorandum-the-freedom-information-act> (accessed November 30, 2022).

⁶⁶³ “Glass Half Full,” *The Knight Open Government Survey - National Security Archive*, March 14, 2011, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB338/KnightOpenGovtSurvey2011.pdf> (accessed September 17, 2021), i.

⁶⁶⁴ Barack H. Obama, “Remarks on Signing the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 and the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act | June 30, 2016,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-signing-the-foia-improvement-act-2016-and-the-puerto-rico-oversight-management-and> (accessed November 30, 2022).

⁶⁶⁵ Josh Gerstein, “Obama Signs FOIA Bill Reform,” *Politico*, June 30, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/blogs/under-the-radar/2016/06/obama-signs-foia-reform-bill-225010> (accessed September 17, 2021).

⁶⁶⁶ Josh Gerstein, “Obama’s Muddy Transparency Record,” *Politico*, March 5, 2012, <https://www.politico.com/story/2012/03/obamas-transparency-stumbles-073606> (accessed September 17, 2021).

of \$36.2 million in cases where they denied providing access to the requested files. Though in over 30 percent of the cases, the administration had wrongfully denied access.⁶⁶⁷ Thus, at the end of Obama's final term, serious differences between the administration and the news media over FOIA requests remained.

Journalists further reported that the Obama administration expected positive media coverage and was easily angered by critical media reporting. Editors and journalists were often contacted by the administration about media reports, even if it was only the headline of an article which the White House took offense at.⁶⁶⁸ However, the Obama administration not only tried to influence the reporting through complaints but went much further.

Reporters who published information acquired through leaks had to fear prosecution. There were several cases where the Justice Department, for instance, obtained phone and email records of media outlets and reporters or where activities of journalists were recorded.⁶⁶⁹ One of the most prominent cases – that had started during the Bush administration – was that of James Risen. *The New York Times* journalist had obtained information on an attempted sabotage of the Iranian nuclear program by the CIA from Jeffrey Sterling, a former CIA officer. In 2011, Sterling was taken into custody for passing on the information. Although Risen had not used the information in a *New York Times* article, he had included it in his book *State of War - The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration* (2006). The communication between Risen and Sterling was investigated, and since 2008 the Department of Justice attempted several times to subpoena Risen in order to force him to give testimony against Sterling. As Risen did not want to reveal his source, the case went to court. In 2011, a Federal District Court judge decided in favor of Risen. However, the administration filed an appeal, and in 2013 the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit overturned the 2011 decision, arguing that Risen was not protected by the First Amendment and had to reveal his source.⁶⁷⁰ In 2014, Risen's appeal to the 2013 decision was rejected by the Supreme Court, which meant that Risen, who still denied to reveal his source, could have been sent to jail.⁶⁷¹ Finally, in 2015, Attorney General Eric Holder relented and Risen would “not be called to testify at a leak

⁶⁶⁷ Ted Bridis, “Obama's Final Year: US Spent \$36 Million in Records Lawsuits,” *Associated Press*, March 14, 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/business-lawsuits-united-states-government-0b27c4d4b23b436d805328694e58c605> (accessed September 17, 2021).

⁶⁶⁸ Leonard Downie, JR. and Sara Rafsky, “The Obama Administration and the Press.”

⁶⁶⁹ Mathew Ingram, “Obama Criticizes the Media, but His Administration Is Part of the Problem,” *Fortune*, March 29, 2016, <https://fortune.com/2016/03/29/obama-media/> (accessed September 17, 2021).

⁶⁷⁰ Leonard Downie, JR. and Sara Rafsky, “The Obama Administration and the Press.”

⁶⁷¹ Adam Liptak, “Supreme Court Rejects Appeal from Times Reporter over Refusal to Identify Source,” *The New York Times*, June 3, 2014, A13.

trial, [...] ending a seven-year legal fight over whether he could be forced to identify his confidential sources.” Risen thus did not face jailtime anymore.⁶⁷² Although the Obama administration won the case against Risen and thus according to the courts did nothing wrong, it is still important to note that the prosecution of leakers did skyrocket during Obama’s presidency.⁶⁷³ Since its enactment in 1917, the Espionage Act has been used to prosecute 13 people for leaking information, eight of which were arrested during Obama’s two terms.⁶⁷⁴ In combination with the legal pursuit of journalists, this shows the mindset of the administration, which seemed to not only have a problem with leakers but also with the media publishing the information. The administration not only tried to deter the leakers but also the media through legal action, which in Risen’s case even meant possible jailtime. Legal actions against them were not taken well by the news media. They claimed that not enough information was made available for them and the American public to monitor the government’s activities. According to journalist Margaret Sullivan, instead of the promised transparency, the Obama administration became “the administration of unprecedented secrecy and of unprecedented attacks on a free press.” She furthermore criticized that legal actions against the press by the Obama administration threatened democracy: “the ability of the press to report freely on its government is [...] under siege.”⁶⁷⁵

Obama’s difficult media relationship also played out at his press conferences.

2. Barack H. Obama and Press Conferences

President Obama held his first press conference on February 9, 2009, and chose the setting of a prime-time press conference for it. Thus, it took place in the East Room of the White House at 8 p.m. Prime-time conferences have a higher level of seriousness due to the very dignified atmosphere of the grandiose room and the evening timing. They typically attract a larger audience. Obama stood behind a podium and the room was filled with reporters

⁶⁷² Matt Apuzzo, “Reporter Wins a 7-Year Fight Not to Testify,” *The New York Times*, January 13, 2015, A1.

⁶⁷³ Liptak, “Supreme Court Rejects Appeal From Times Reporter Over Refusal to Identify Source.”

⁶⁷⁴ Cleve R. Wootson, JR., “Trump Rages About Leakers. Obama Quietly Prosecuted Them,” *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/06/08/trump-rages-about-leakers-obama-quietly-prosecuted-them/> (accessed September 17, 2021). The Espionage Act originally criminalized assisting U.S. enemies or obstructing military operations during WWI. Today it is mainly used for the prosecution of leakers.

⁶⁷⁵ Margaret Sullivan, “Leak Investigations Are an Assault on the Press, and on Democracy, Too,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2013, <https://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/14/leak-investigations-are-an-assault-on-the-press-and-on-democracy-too/> (accessed September 17, 2021).

seated in a half-circle around him.⁶⁷⁶ Overall, the conference would provide insight into what his future press conferences were going to look like. Several recurring elements were already evident: Obama’s quiet but humorous character, his unusual eloquence, and his preference for opening statements and lengthy answers.

By the time Barack Obama became president, opening statements had been a consistent part of press conferences as many of his predecessors had used them frequently to start their conferences with various announcements.⁶⁷⁷ Obama continued this habit and began his roughly one-hour-long press conference with an about seven-and-a-half minute long opening statement that focused on the financial crisis, the main topic that concerned Americans at that time.⁶⁷⁸

After the opening statement, Obama answered a total of 13 questions. He answered in a calm and civil manner and – by doing so – looked confident in his ability to field the media’s questions. He further used his eloquence in giving his answers and also masterfully evading the ones he did not want to give clear answers to. He, for instance, would often dodge questions during his press conferences by delaying the answer to future announcements. However, those announcements were then often made through other channels managed by the White House.⁶⁷⁹

In his first press conference, it also shined through that he liked to respond in detail to questions, giving long answers, with the longest being over eight minutes.⁶⁸⁰ White House journalist Jackie Calmes explained that Obama “had so much to say because he was such a thoughtful president, that he could go on. His answers were about twice as long as they ever needed to be on any subject.”⁶⁸¹ The press corps was not enthusiastic about Obama’s preference for long answers. Journalists saw it as a time-consuming tactic. In the coming years, he would be criticized by the White House press corps for “running out the clock by ‘filibustering’ with his answers.”⁶⁸² Since Obama tended to give lengthy answers in a

⁶⁷⁶ “The President’s News Conference | February 09, 2009,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1125> (accessed December 1, 2022); “2/9/09: Presidential Press Conference | Video,” *The Obama White House YouTube Channel*, February 10, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XuqK_-nKccM (accessed December 1, 2022).

⁶⁷⁷ Eshbaugh-Soha, “Presidential Influence of the News Media: The Case of the Press Conference”: 554–555.

⁶⁷⁸ “The President’s News Conference | February 09, 2009”; “2/9/09: Presidential Press Conference | Video,” 00:00-07:40.

⁶⁷⁹ “The President’s News Conference | February 09, 2009”; Milligan, “The Presidency and the Press”: 26.

⁶⁸⁰ “The President’s News Conference | February 09, 2009”; “2/9/09: Presidential Press Conference | Video,” 17:59-26:18.

⁶⁸¹ “JFK First to Go Live with the Press: Transcript,” *JFKL*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/about-us/social-media-apps/jfk35-podcast/season-4/jfk-first-to-go-live-with-the-press/jfk-first-to-go-live-with-the-press-transcript> (accessed December 1, 2022).

⁶⁸² Milligan, “The Presidency and the Press”: 26.

variety of situations and not just in conversations with the news media, this was likely not just pure tactics. However, the president did not seem to be so bothered by the press corps' criticism that he changed his answering style. Accordingly, he was probably not entirely unhappy to be able to reduce the number of questions in this way.

Moreover, Obama showed the humor he would frequently use. When he called on the legendary White House correspondent Helen Thomas who had started her career as a correspondent during President Kennedy's time in office and was known for her bluntness, he stated, causing some laughter: "All right, Helen [...]. This is my inaugural moment here. [Laughter] I'm really excited."⁶⁸³

The media's reaction would reflect this impression of his first press conference with *Vanity Fair* writing:

There were all the familiar trappings of authority: the red carpet stretching behind him, the gilt torchieres on either side, and the familiar, bulky lectern – the blue goose – with the presidential seal. But Barack Obama's first White House news conference had an air of refreshing novelty all the same. His answers were cogent and fluid (if sometimes very long). [...] He teed off on the reporters' questions (answering or avoiding them as he saw fit) to say what he wanted to say. In the process, he looked capable, confident, cool. He showed flashes of welcome humor, paying gentle homage to Helen Thomas, the now-frail doyenne of the White House regulars.⁶⁸⁴

But overall, these were no new tactics, yet, as Obama was very eloquent, he had an easier time using them, as he did in his answers on health reform questions as well (see VI.4.1). Otherwise, Obama did not modify the process of the press conferences in a noticeable way. His average of less than two press conferences per month does not seem to be much lower than, for instance, Kennedy's. But the difference is that Obama held more joint than solo press conferences whereas Kennedy's news conferences were all solo.⁶⁸⁵ This tactic did not resonate well with the press corps which complained about low access to Obama and an absence of transparency. White House correspondents argued that they were circumvented by the president who used other forums of interaction with other parts of the media more intensively. They accused Obama of intentionally evading the harder questions asked by the press corps.⁶⁸⁶ However, this critique does not give the whole

⁶⁸³ "The President's News Conference | February 09, 2009."

⁶⁸⁴ Todd Purdum, "Obama Meets the Press, and Lives," *Vanity Fair*, February 10, 2009, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2009/02/obama-meets-the-press-and-lives> (accessed December 1, 2022).

⁶⁸⁵ Gerhard Peters, "Presidential News Conferences."

⁶⁸⁶ Andrea Morabito, "Press Corps Confronts Shrouded White House," *Broadcasting & Cable*, 143, no. 10 (2013), 18: 18.

picture. When looking at his solo press conferences in comparison with his two direct predecessors, Obama held more, thus having more exposure to the press corps “on his own.” Therefore, the reasons for the press corps’ complaints about less interaction with the president were influenced by other factors. Although Obama held more solo press conferences, he had fewer exchanges with reporters than every president since Ronald Reagan, not even half the number of exchanges of President Bush II and not even a fifth of President Clinton’s. Thus, his general availability to the press was much lower.⁶⁸⁷

The lower frequency of interactions with the president, the evasion or “filibustering” of questions at press conferences and the general lack of transparency of the administration made it difficult for the White House press corps to get to know President Obama. White House correspondent Peter Baker complained: “I don’t know what makes the man tick.” The press corps argued that they could not fulfill their intended role “to explain why the president does what he does.” Their reporting depended much more on external, non-White House sources, on people who worked with the White House or lawmakers in Congress.⁶⁸⁸

According to White House correspondents, the relationship particularly worsened with the reelection campaign, as the focus of the administration shifted to winning the election.⁶⁸⁹

Yet, reporters had the impression that the administration at the same time wanted the media to know about the president’s decision-making process and his thinking, yet also wanted to control the message. They were struggling with a balance between those two.⁶⁹⁰

Presidents are also not restricted to press conferences when they interact with the media. Other options include interviews with selected network shows or short question-and-answer sessions, which are brief exchanges between a limited number of press corps reporters and the president.⁶⁹¹ Presidents can choose how to combine these three communication options according to their needs and personal preferences. The 44th president preferred venues where he could give elaborate answers to explain his policies. Thus, he “shied away from” short question-and-answer sessions. It further became clear

⁶⁸⁷ Gerhard Peters, “Presidential News Conferences.” Exchanges with Reporters are classified by the American Presidency Project as follows: “An exchange with reporters typically happens incidentally alongside some other meeting or event. This is often while the President is moving from one location to another and pauses to take questions from reporters (e.g., walking to the helicopter). Alternatively, the President may decide at the end of remarks to respond to questions from reporters.”

⁶⁸⁸ Milligan, “The Presidency and the Press”: 24.

⁶⁸⁹ Morabito, “Press Corps Confronts Shrouded White House”: 18.

⁶⁹⁰ Milligan, “The Presidency and the Press”: 26.

⁶⁹¹ Martha Joynt Kumar, “W.H. Press Conferences turn 100.”

that Obama favored the setting of an interview which allowed him to talk in much more detail about specific issues targeted to particular audiences.⁶⁹²

Furthermore, today presidents are less dependent on the media because of tools like social media that enable them to explain their decisions directly to the public. Thus, as he needed the media less to get into contact with voters, Obama was able to choose the venues and time he wanted to interact with the media more freely than his predecessors.⁶⁹³ But what does the new technology mean for the future of press conferences and the White House press corps? According to Kumar, press conferences will stay important communication tools as they are a forum “where presidents establish the legitimacy of their ideas and call for public support” in front of an informed audience of reporters. They enable presidents to show their knowledge on issues. “Those needs remain.”⁶⁹⁴ So far this seems true, as both his successors continued to hold press conferences.

Yet, one question remains: How useful is a White House press corps with little access to the president? The correspondents argued that through their presence at the White House they at least could check on the president and the administration from a shorter distance than other media members. With their physical closeness at the White House, they can better prevent the administration from covering up major issues, for instance, on the president’s health.⁶⁹⁵

Obama did not enjoy press conferences very much, but he had such an unprecedented affinity to Internet based communication technology, that the 44th president is often referred to as “the first Internet president.”⁶⁹⁶

3. Barack H. Obama and Social Media

The affinity of the “iPod-tuned, Facebook-friendly, Twittering[sic!] politician who fits right into the digital age and makes other leaders look analogue” was already visible during his presidential campaign.⁶⁹⁷ Obama was the first president who fully embraced the new media environment he faced in 2008 and turned his presidential campaign into a model of how to use social media effectively. A factor of major importance for Barack Obama’s

⁶⁹² Kumar, *Managing the President's Message*, 313–16.

⁶⁹³ Martha Joynt Kumar, “Presidential Press Conferences.”

⁶⁹⁴ Martha Joynt Kumar, “W.H. Press Conferences turn 100.”

⁶⁹⁵ Milligan, “The Presidency and the Press”: 27.

⁶⁹⁶ George C. Edwards, “Organizing for (In)Action,” in *Columns to Characters*, 183.

⁶⁹⁷ Paul Harris and David Smith, “Obama’s Wi-Fi White House Speaks to the YouTube Age,” *The Guardian*, November 16, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/16/obama-white-house-barackobama> (accessed April 22, 2020).

presidential campaign and presidency was the appreciation of the contemporary media environment, which had become much more diverse. Besides an immense increase in the number of television networks, the crucial change had been the rise of the Internet.⁶⁹⁸ With these modern technologies at hand, Obama's ability to circumvent the established media became unprecedented.⁶⁹⁹

Social media revolutionized the extent to which Obama was capable of engaging directly with voters. The 2008 presidential campaign showed how the society and the media environment had evolved and how to use this progression in the most effective way for politics. Obama's online operations team of the 2008 campaign worked according to the motto: "Meet the voters where they're at." They spread their own content directly to voters, raised campaign money and organized their supporters all through their social media activities. According to Andrew Rasiej, Obama's campaign "leapfrogged not just the Clinton and McCain campaigns but also the mainstream media when it comes to reaching their supporters."⁷⁰⁰ This tremendous success of Obama's campaign is premised on the use of several tools.

One main tool was the social media platform *YouTube*, where the campaign team uploaded videos of Obama and his supporters. The watch time of the Obama campaign aggregated to about 14.5 million hours until November 2008. The same amount of time on television would have cost \$47 million. Assuming that the production costs were similar, the *YouTube* videos were basically free advertisement.⁷⁰¹ But the advantage of *YouTube* over conventional television goes much further than simple economic considerations. The Obama campaign had recognized that the platform enabled them to make the presidential candidate available to voters and awaken their interest in him and his message without the media's influence. The idea behind getting people more involved with the videos was that besides commenting on the videos or forwarding them to family and friends, they would start initiatives in their neighborhoods to support Obama.⁷⁰²

⁶⁹⁸ Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler, "Political Communication — Old and New Media Relationships": 167–9.

⁶⁹⁹ Paul Harris and David Smith, "Obama's Wi-Fi White House Speaks to the YouTube Age."

⁷⁰⁰ Jose A. Vargas, "Obama's Wide Web: From Youtube to Text Messaging, Candidate's Team Connects to Voters," *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2008. C01.

⁷⁰¹ Quoted in Claire C. Miller, "How Obama's Internet Campaign Changed Politics," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2008, <https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/how-obamas-internet-campaign-changed-politics/> (accessed September 17, 2021).

⁷⁰² Nikki Schwab, "In Obama-McCain Race, YouTube Became a Serious Battleground for Presidential Politics," *U.S. News & World Report*, November 7, 2008, <https://www.usnews.com/news/campaign-2008/articles/2008/11/07/in-obama-mccain-race-youtube-became-a-serious-battleground-for-presidential-politics> (accessed April 17, 2020).

This was further encouraged by Obama's presence on other social networks including *Facebook*. He even had profiles on sites for specific communities as, for instance *BlackPlanet.com*, an African American social network site. The campaign team tried to redirect voters from these social network sites to their own website *BarackObama.com*. Their efforts were successful, as according to Alex Castellanos, the Obama campaign had managed to "built a movement" with a common cause and encouraged people to believe in their power to bring about change. To support people with their initiatives, the main part of the website *BarackObama.com* was *My.BarackObama.com* which provided organizing tools for offline events. By the end of August 2008, it had been used for roughly 80,000 offline events.⁷⁰³ Moreover, political strategist Joe Trippi stated that coordinating so many supporters "would have in the past required an army of volunteers and paid organizers on the ground." Thus, those modern technologies and their effective employment had enabled Obama to reach millions of voters while needing fewer personnel.⁷⁰⁴

After the tremendously successful employment of social media outlets during his campaign, Obama continued to include them in his presidential media strategy. Although Obama still engaged with traditional media outlets, he also seized new opportunities that were available.⁷⁰⁵ Paul Harris and David Smith foresaw in 2008 that "it will put the Washington media establishment in the unusual position of being outsiders on a relationship between a President and his public."⁷⁰⁶ The pointed prediction to some extent became true. Obama used internet-based communication channels to bypass the media and especially the White House press corps, for which he was heavily criticized (see VI.2).⁷⁰⁷ Generally, the Obama administration placed less value on dominating the conversations on bigger media outlets or television shows in comparison with prior administrations. They rather focused on reaching specific audiences via niche shows or social media. This can be attributed to the decentralized media environment, where "winning the framing battles on the network evening news programs mattered less" but also to Obama's humorous and non-aggressive personality, which was particularly suitable for social media and comedy shows.⁷⁰⁸

⁷⁰³ Vargas, "Obama's Wide Web: From Youtube to Text Messaging, Candidate's Team Connects to Voters."

⁷⁰⁴ Claire C. Miller, "How Obama's Internet Campaign Changed Politics," Trippi quoted in Miller.

⁷⁰⁵ Peter Baker, "Foreword," in *Columns to Characters*, viii.

⁷⁰⁶ Paul Harris and David Smith, "Obama's Wi-Fi White House Speaks to the YouTube Age."

⁷⁰⁷ Peter Baker, "Foreword," in *Columns to Characters*, viii, x.

⁷⁰⁸ Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication and Character*, 167–68.

An example of how Obama managed to circumvent the press corps and avoid direct questioning was his use of *Twitter*.⁷⁰⁹ In 2011, Obama tried to omit the media by hosting a so-called *Twitter* Town Hall. Ordinary citizens could ask Obama questions through submitting them on *Twitter*. Selected questions were then answered by Obama, however, not in a tweet of up to 140 characters, but verbally.⁷¹⁰ Overall, the *Twitter* Town Hall was a major success among *Twitter* users.⁷¹¹ A similar event was done with the social news aggregator *Reddit* in 2012 where Obama responded to ten questions by users. It was so popular amongst *Reddit* users that the website had difficulties handling the traffic.⁷¹² Obama increased his *Twitter* presence further in 2015 when he became the first president who had his own *Twitter* account named @POTUS, as per acronym of President of the United States. The account facilitated Obama's direct communication with the American public even more and was thus an excellent option around the unwanted filtering by the media. He gained over 217,000 followers within 45 minutes of his first tweet that read:

Hello, Twitter! It's Barack. Really! Six years in, they're finally giving me my own account.⁷¹³

Over the course of his presidency, Obama frequently used *Twitter*. The tweets were in line with and sounded like official statements (also see VI.4.2).⁷¹⁴

Another way around the media was *YouTube*. Obama, for instance, gave interviews with *YouTube* stars. This was part of his media strategy as *YouTube* stars often have many subscribers. An example is the day of his last State of the Union Address. Although the White House gave the *Today Show* access to Obama before the address, the president was also interviewed by three *YouTube* stars on the same day. With these unconventional

⁷⁰⁹ Mathew Ingram, "Obama Criticizes the Media, but His Administration Is Part of the Problem."

⁷¹⁰ "President Obama Twitter Town Hall Meeting | July 6, 2011 | Video," *C-SPAN.org*, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?300349-1/president-obama-twitter-town-hall-meeting> (accessed December 1, 2022).

⁷¹¹ Ed Pilkington, "Barack Obama Becomes First Us President to Host a Twitter Town Hall," *The Guardian*, July 6, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/jul/06/barack-obama-twitter-town-hall> (accessed February 13, 2020).

⁷¹² Hayley Tsukayama, "Obama on Reddit: By the Numbers," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/obama-on-reddit-by-the-numbers/2012/08/30/1965cd5c-f2a4-11e1-892d-bc92fee603a7_story.html (accessed April 15, 2020).

⁷¹³ Roberta Rampton, "Obama Gets His Own Account on Twitter: 'It's Barack. Really!'," *Reuters*, May 18, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-obama-twitter/obama-gets-his-own-account-on-twitter-its-barack-really-idUSL1N0Y915O20150518> (accessed April 17, 2020); Barack H. Obama, "Tweet on May 18, 2015, 11:38 A.M. EST," @POTUS44 *Twitter* Account, <https://twitter.com/POTUS44/status/600324682190053376> (accessed December 2, 2022). To increase the readability, social media posts and tweets are set off from the body text, although they do not exceed three lines.

⁷¹⁴ Jeremy Shapiro, "The World Will Soon Start Talking Like Trump," *Foreign Policy*, October 16, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/16/the-world-will-soon-start-talking-like-trump/> (accessed May 28, 2020).

YouTube interviews Obama approximately reached one million people, which was about double the viewership of the *Today Show*.⁷¹⁵

Moreover, in December of 2014, the Obama administration announced the protection of Bristol Bay in Alaska from oil and gas drilling through a short video with the president on *Facebook*.⁷¹⁶ With that the administration generated positive feedback online but circumvented the media – in particular the White House press corps. Especially the latter were angered as – according to Josh Earnest – they see themselves as the ones “reporting breaking news.”⁷¹⁷

Social media not only allowed him to give interviews or answer questions in non-mainstream media settings but also directly talk to the public. Through *Twitter* or the White House *YouTube* channel, Obama could address issues he wanted to, in a way he wished to, at a time he pleased and all directly to the people without anyone else possibly restricting his communication efforts. The technology enabled him to circumvent the media fully, making them less important for his communication efforts.⁷¹⁸ Consequently, the White House channels were criticized by the news media as “state-run media” and in a way it certainly can be seen so.⁷¹⁹ Yet, this was only one tool in the president’s media strategy, and the “classical” media outlets were still independent of and not controlled by the government.

The new technology also allowed for the frequent publication of photographs. Obama granted his Chief Official White House Photographer, Pete Souza, broad access. At the same time, media photographers were relatively restricted and, in some instances, completely excluded from events. In these cases – to the anger of them – the White House would publish Souza’s photos on social media and the media could only use Souza’s photos.⁷²⁰

However, the new technology is not only positive for presidents. It can also make them more vulnerable. Videos of missteps by presidents can be easily circulated and can get extensive reach. However, not only missteps but also rumors or untruths may gain traction

⁷¹⁵ Peter Baker, “Foreword,” in *Columns to Characters*, viii.

⁷¹⁶ Barack H. Obama, “President Obama Just Took Action to Protect One of Our Greatest National Treasures: Alaska’s Bristol Bay,” *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10153032224739238> (accessed December 2, 2022).

⁷¹⁷ Milligan, “The Presidency and the Press”: 25.

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

⁷¹⁹ Morabito, “Press Corps Confronts Shrouded White House”: 18.

⁷²⁰ Marshall, “Nixon Is Gone, but His Media Strategy Lives On”; Kenneth T. Walsh, *Ultimate Insiders: White House Photographers and How They Shape History* (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 163-165, 175.

on social networks and with enough reach can become quite persistent as the birther movement showed.⁷²¹

The new technology did not only influence the president's or administration's behavior. Former Press Secretary Josh Earnest ended the morning "gaggles" as correspondents simply live tweeted every word, he said.⁷²² Social media has also influenced the media's reporting, which even some correspondents say is too focused on the branding of the reporter or newspaper and catchphrases. Ann Compton who was a White House correspondent for several decades said "It's not good. [...] It's not informative for the American people. But we sure do overdo it now."⁷²³

However, Obama not fully gave up interacting with the media. The 44th president would continue to use established forums of interaction (see VI.1 and VI.2). Moreover, as his predecessors, Obama also used television to directly communicate with a large part of public through live televised press conferences, addresses, and speeches. Within the first ten months of his presidency, he held four prime-time press conferences, gave two addresses before Congress, and held a speech about Afghanistan that all were broadcast at least by one major network and drew significant audiences.⁷²⁴ Obama also liked televised interviews as they allowed him to describe his thinking and policies in detail directly to the public – "using the media as his vehicle."⁷²⁵ But the new technology gave Obama vast possibilities his predecessors had not enjoyed. The degree to which he could circumvent the media was unprecedented and with his adoption of the latest technologies, Obama has set new standards and changed the way presidents communicate.

Arguably the most controversial legislative accomplishment Obama planned to achieve during his presidency was the reform of the health care system. Here, too, his media strategy was of great importance.

⁷²¹ Susan J. Douglas, "Presidents and the Media," in *Recapturing the Oval Office*, 160–61. The movement alleged that current President Barack Obama was not born in the United States – thus not eligible to hold the highest office of the country – and wanting Obama to publish the long form of his birth certificate, which he did. The claims were false but were (and still are) widely spread among in particular Republican voters.

⁷²² Milligan, "The Presidency and the Press": 25. Gaggles are off-camera meetings in the secretary's office that help the correspondents to get an idea about the president's daily schedule.

⁷²³ Ibid.

⁷²⁴ Kumar, *Managing the President's Message*, 318. Statistics on viewership by Nielsen Wire quoted in Kumar.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

4. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act

After about a year of fierce political struggle, President Obama signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act on March 23, 2010.⁷²⁶ The law, frequently abbreviated as ACA or colloquially called Obamacare, profoundly reformed the U.S. healthcare system and is seen as a major achievement of Obama.⁷²⁷ However, the act is also regarded as “one of the most controversial and divisive pieces of legislation in recent American history.” Neither in the House, nor in the Senate did the ACA get one vote by a Republican, and the fight over the piece of legislation launched and destroyed political careers. Even after its enactment, the Affordable Care Act stayed highly controversial, and Republicans have since then tried to repeal or alter the law several dozens of times.⁷²⁸

The Long and Arduous Story of Healthcare in the U.S.

The situation regarding healthcare when Barack Obama became president is well described by Andrew Koppelman:

the American health care system did a fine job of delivering care to some Americans, and a terrible job with many others. Those in the first group, the ones who were well taken care of, primarily included workers who got good insurance from their employers, and retirees on Medicare. The losers were those in jobs that did not provide insurance, small-business owners, independent contractors who needed to purchase their insurance in the nongroup markets, and the unemployed.⁷²⁹

In 2009, 45 million Americans were without health care insurance.⁷³⁰ Those uninsured do not receive care for small illnesses, preventative care, or regular care of chronic conditions, and in particular with the latter, become seriously ill.⁷³¹ They then have to go to the emergency rooms, which must treat emergency patients even if they do not have health insurance.⁷³² Besides the effect this care pattern has on the person’s health in general, it is

⁷²⁶ Steven J. Stack, “Health Care Reform in the United States: Past Present and Future Challenges,” *World Medical Journal*, 62, no. 4 (2016), 153–7: 154.

⁷²⁷ Jonathan Law, *A Dictionary of Nursing*, 8th ed., Oxford Reference Online Premium (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁷²⁸ Stack, “Health Care Reform in the United States”: 154.

⁷²⁹ Andrew Koppelman, *The Tough Luck Constitution and the Assault on Health Care Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28.

⁷³⁰ Rachel Garfield, Kendal Orgera and Anthony Damico, “The Uninsured and the ACA - a Primer: Key Facts About Health Insurance and the Uninsured Amidst Changes to the Affordable Care Act,” *Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation* (January 2019), 1–25: 7.

⁷³¹ Stack, “Health Care Reform in the United States”: 153.

⁷³² “Emergency Medical Treatment & Labor Act (EMTALA),” *The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services*, <https://www.cms.gov/Regulations-and-Guidance/Legislation/EMTALA> (accessed December 14, 2022).

significantly more costly than treating conditions before they become emergencies, making the U.S. healthcare system overall expensive and unsustainable.⁷³³

The fact that a developed country as the United States does not have universal health care is in Steven Stack's view largely due to the American values of individualism and self-reliance combined with a suspicion of too much government interference. Discussions on health care reform revealed two general groups in the U.S. Whereas one group saw health care as a right which should be independent of one's financial solvency and thus thought the reform was a step in the right direction, the other group saw it as too much government interference, which would turn into a "slippery slope [...] to socialism."⁷³⁴

Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt, several presidents before Barack Obama had already tried to introduce some form of a national health insurance, yet mostly had failed. The first to achieve it in some parts was Lyndon B. Johnson with Medicare and Medicaid, the federal health insurance programs for the elderly and disabled Americans as well as for low-income Americans, respectively. Decades later, President Clinton signed the Children's Health Insurance Program (S-CHIP) into law, an insurance program for children whose parents' income is too high to qualify for Medicaid. There were some expansions of existing programs over the decades, yet no new health insurance programs.⁷³⁵

During the 2008 presidential campaign, health care was a major topic. Presidential candidate Barack Obama vowed to tackle health care reform until the end of his first term, but then as president concluded that within the first year of his presidency the chances would be best, due to Democratic majorities in the House and the Senate.⁷³⁶

There were several political challenges connected to health care reform. First, despite Democratic members of Congress agreeing that reform was needed, they did not agree on how. Some wanted the federal government to step in and provide health insurance plans (public option), others wanted to stick with the private market but expand coverage there.⁷³⁷ To avoid a stalemate created by a divide in Congress, the Obama administration did not secretly draft legislation, but had the legislators take "the lead on writing" the law, strongly involving them in the process.⁷³⁸

⁷³³ Stack, "Health Care Reform in the United States": 153.

⁷³⁴ Ibid., 153–54.

⁷³⁵ Ibid., 153.

⁷³⁶ Michael Nelson, "Barack Obama: Domestic Affairs," *Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/president/obama/domestic-affairs> (accessed March 15, 2021).

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

⁷³⁸ Ibid; Koppelman, *The Tough Luck Constitution and the Assault on Health Care Reform*, 34.

Second, Americans with health insurance were concerned that a change to the current health care system might worsen their care and/or cost situation while at the same time increase the federal budget deficit, which was a major concern due to the financial crisis and the connected Recovery Act.⁷³⁹ To reassure concerned Americans, Obama insisted over and over again: Everyone who liked their doctor or plan would be able to keep them. A promise that would become a major problem with the rollout of the law (see VI.4.1).⁷⁴⁰ To address the budget challenge, Obama opted for a budget neutral reform, meaning it “save[s] as much money as it spent[s].”⁷⁴¹

Third, an important aspect to finance health care was the individual mandate (see explanation in the next section). At the beginning, there was a bipartisan consensus on the need for a mandate, it was even a Republican idea, first published in 1989 by the Heritage Foundation.⁷⁴² It was not seen as a controversial aspect of the legislation. Even in June of 2009, Republican Senator Charles Grassley stated, that “there isn't anything wrong with it, [...] I believe that there is a bipartisan consensus to have individual mandates.”⁷⁴³ However, this suddenly changed, and the mandate became a major attack point, with Republicans calling it unconstitutional. As Koppelman argues, Republicans “had [...] abandoned the idea of universal health coverage.”⁷⁴⁴

The continuing disagreement on the exact formulation of the health care reform law in the Democratic camp as well as the rejection attitude of the Republicans frustrated the president. After a “months-long decline in public and congressional support for reform,” in September 2009, President Obama used an address to Congress to get his message across and move the legislation forward. According to Michael Nelson, the speech achieved its aim by halting the decline and advanced the process so that Obama could initiate “a successful campaign to persuade members of Congress in face-to-face meetings.” After several months of strenuous negotiations, the House adopted the Senate’s health care reform bill. Thus, on March 23, 2010, the president signed the Affordable Care Act.⁷⁴⁵

⁷³⁹ Michael Nelson, “Barack Obama: Domestic Affairs.”

⁷⁴⁰ *PolitiFact*, <https://www.politifact.com/obama-like-health-care-keep/> (accessed December 20, 2022).

⁷⁴¹ Michael Nelson, “Barack Obama: Domestic Affairs.”

⁷⁴² Koppelman, *The Tough Luck Constitution and the Assault on Health Care Reform*, 32, 34; Stuart M. Butler, “Assuring Affordable Health Care for All Americans,” *The Heritage Foundation*, October 1, 1989, <https://www.heritage.org/social-security/report/assuring-affordable-health-care-all-americans> (accessed December 20, 2022).

⁷⁴³ “Transcript: Sens. Dodd, Grassley on ‘FNS’ | June 14, 2009,” *Fox News*, January 14, 2015, <https://www.foxnews.com/story/transcript-sens-dodd-grassley-on-fns> (accessed December 20, 2022).

⁷⁴⁴ Koppelman, *The Tough Luck Constitution and the Assault on Health Care Reform*, 35.

⁷⁴⁵ Michael Nelson, “Barack Obama: Domestic Affairs.”

*What the Law Changed*⁷⁴⁶

The Affordable Care Act strongly intervened in the private health insurance markets. First, the law created new health insurance marketplaces where consumers can buy new insurance plans. For those with qualifying income, subsidies are available to make these plans more affordable.⁷⁴⁷

Second, the act requires all citizens and legal immigrants to buy health insurance or pay a fine. Through this ‘individual mandate’ provision, healthy and young individuals are also incentivized to buy health insurance. Moreover, the mandate makes it unfeasible for individuals to wait with buying health insurance until they injure themselves or become sick.⁷⁴⁸ Although politically highly unpopular, the mandate was a necessary measure to prohibit the insurance market from collapsing: Through the payments by (young) healthy individuals, the care and treatments of the sick (mostly older patients) are financed.⁷⁴⁹

Third, regulations were put in place concerning availability and content of insurance policies. Insurers were no longer allowed to deny coverage to individuals with preexisting conditions or charge substantially higher rates due to the individual’s medical history. The ACA outlawed ‘rescission,’ where insurers would cancel the policy when its holder fell ill.⁷⁵⁰ Insurers also could no longer solely pay a limited amount for each person. This had been especially precarious had a person gotten seriously ill and treatment costs would go over the limit of the insurance. Moreover, young adults were covered through their parents’ health care plan until the age of 26, and certain preventative care had to be covered by insurance plans without the insured person paying any of the connected costs.⁷⁵¹

And fourth, through the Medicaid expansion more low-income Americans became eligible to the public health insurance program.⁷⁵²

The Affordable Care Act After Its Enactment

The fight around healthcare did not stop with the ACA’s enactment. When Republicans took over the House in 2010, they held many repeal votes. After also winning the majority

⁷⁴⁶ As not all details of the law can be covered here, the most controversial aspects and provisions of the law are discussed.

⁷⁴⁷ Stack, “Health Care Reform in the United States”: 154.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁹ Koppelman, *The Tough Luck Constitution and the Assault on Health Care Reform*, 32; Stack, “Health Care Reform in the United States”: 154.

⁷⁵⁰ Koppelman, *The Tough Luck Constitution and the Assault on Health Care Reform*, 32.

⁷⁵¹ Stack, “Health Care Reform in the United States”: 154–5.

⁷⁵² Ibid., 155.

in the Senate four years later, both Houses of Congress tried to repeal the ACA. In 2016, President Obama vetoed a Republican bill to repeal the ACA.⁷⁵³

But the law was also challenged in courts. During Obama's presidency, the Supreme Court of the United States decided three times on the fate of the ACA. In June 2012, the highest U.S. court decided in *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius* that the individual mandate was constitutional, which was highly important for the ACA to function. Yet, the court also ruled that the states could decide whether they wanted to expand Medicaid to allow more people to become eligible to the program or not. The second Supreme Court case, *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores*, was decided in June 2014. The judges permitted privately held companies to claim a religious exemption from the obligation to offer contraceptive coverage to their employees. This reduced the latter's access to contraceptives. In the third Supreme Court case, *King v. Burwell* (June 2015), the court upheld the federal government's tax subsidies for eligible individuals, both those living in states with and those living in states without their own exchanges. Thus, the decision allowed more people to pay for their health coverage through subsidies.⁷⁵⁴

Yet, one of the most significant challenges for the Affordable Care Act inflicted the Obama Administration on itself. When the program was launched in 2013, the website that should have been used to sign up for health insurance did not function properly. For many months, news on the ACA revolved around the problematic rollout and its continuous problems (see VI.4.1). This was a major blunder by the administration and damaged the reputation of the ACA in the public.⁷⁵⁵

Several years after Obama signing the law, it seemed to work as it was supposed to. In 2016, 20 million additional people had gotten health insurance through the Affordable Care Act. Furthermore, the quality as well as efficiency of health care had increased. From 2010 until 2014, when the Act was finally entirely implemented, the rate of uninsured persons dropped from overall 16.3 percent in 2010 to 10.4 in 2014. The percentage dropped further in Obama's last two years of his presidency to a low of 8.8 percent in 2016.⁷⁵⁶

Yet, there were and still are problems. For example, a portion of the American population remains unable to afford healthcare despite the availability of subsidies. Prescription drug

⁷⁵³ Michael Nelson, "Barack Obama: Domestic Affairs."

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁶ Stack, "Health Care Reform in the United States": 153, 155; "People Without Health Insurance Coverage by Selected Characteristics: 2010 and 2011," *Census Bureau*, <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/p60/243/table7.pdf> (accessed December 16, 2022); "Coverage Numbers and Rates by Type of Health Insurance: 2013 to 2016," *Census Bureau*, <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/p60/260/table1.pdf> (accessed December 16, 2022).

costs kept rising, and young and healthy Americans continue to be reluctant to take out health insurance. Thus, Stack rightly argues that it is too soon to say whether the ACA was “truly transformative, or [...] a failed experiment.”⁷⁵⁷

The election of Donald Trump to the highest office of the land was seen as a further danger to the ACA as one of his major campaign pledges had been repealing the Affordable Care Act. But the law had become more popular, and he failed in abolishing it.⁷⁵⁸

During the Obama presidency healthcare reform was not only a major topic in Congress, but also in the media, and Obama had to face many critical questions during his press conferences.

4.1 Press Conferences and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act

President Obama held 68 solo press conferences over his eight years in office and was asked at least one question on health care reform in over a quarter of them. Besides the limitation on press conferences where he was asked questions on health care reform or the Affordable Care Act, the selection was further limited to press conferences of two specific periods: During the first period (June 2009 until March 2010) the legislative process was still ongoing, and the law not yet passed. The second period (November 2013 until April 2014) goes from just before to shortly after the law took effect. During this period, major problems arose due to technical and cancellation issues. The two periods were selected because they represent two main high-pressure situations for the president to deliver on one of his main campaign promises. Moreover, they include the press conferences with the most questions asked on health care reform or the ACA.⁷⁵⁹

The first press conference where Obama was asked questions on the Affordable Care Act was at the end of June 2009 and it was held in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room. In his opening statement the president covered three topics, of which one was healthcare. However, only two questions were asked on the reform in the subsequent question-and-answer part.⁷⁶⁰

The first question dealt with the insurance industry opposing government health insurance. David Jackson of *USA Today* wanted to know whether the president would sign a bill

⁷⁵⁷ Stack, “Health Care Reform in the United States”: 153, 156-157.

⁷⁵⁸ Michael Nelson, “Barack Obama: Domestic Affairs.”

⁷⁵⁹ The press conference on July 10, 2009, is not included in this analysis as Obama was only asked one question on health care reform.

⁷⁶⁰ “The President's News Conference | June 23, 2009,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1122> (accessed July 13, 2022). The counted questions do not include follow-up question as the follow-ups were already in the original questions.

without a public plan. Obama began his answer in a for him typical manner: “Well, let’s talk first of all about health care reform more broadly.” These first words already indicated his preferred way of answering questions. Obama mostly gave elaborate and structured answers where he would speak verbosely on the topic. At the end he might come to the question or leave it unanswered. In this case, Obama had only indirectly answered whether the public plan was negotiable by stating that it was “a [sic!] important tool to discipline insurance companies.” But even with two follow ups, Jackson could not get the president to a yes or no answer to his original question. In the end, the president simply called on the next reporter.⁷⁶¹

But in his answer, Obama made a statement which he also repeated frequently on other occasions: “If you like your plan and you like your doctor, you won’t have to do a thing. You keep your plan; you keep your doctor.”⁷⁶² This would prove to be problematic in the future as will be shown in detail later.

A little later during the conference, Jake Tapper from *ABC News* tried his luck getting President Obama to answer the question by his colleague David Jackson, causing the following humorous exchange:

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Before I ask my question, I’m wondering if you could actually answer David’s. Is the public plan nonnegotiable?

The President. Well, that’s your question. [Laughter]

Q. Well, you didn’t answer –

The President. You think you’re going to – are you the ombudsman for the White House press corps? [Laughter] What’s your – is that your question? [Laughter]

Q. Well, then I have a two-part question. [Laughter]

Q. Go for it, Jake.

Q. Is the public plan nonnegotiable? And while I appreciate your Spock-like language about the logic of the health care plan, the public plan, [...].

The President. I got you. [...] First of all, was the reference to Spock – is that a crack on my ears? [Laughter] All right, I just want to make sure. No?

Q. I would never make fun of your ears, sir. [Laughter].⁷⁶³

Such humorous back-and-forth frequently occurred during the press conferences of President Obama. Although he and the press corps did not get along too well in terms of information flow and transparency (see VI.1 and VI.2), these humorous exchanges seemed

⁷⁶¹ Ibid.

⁷⁶² Ibid.

⁷⁶³ Ibid. Obama had frequently made and would continue throughout his presidency to make fun of his ears as being large.

to be enjoyed by both sides. Tapper was a little more successful with his question. The president said that “right now [...] our position is that a public plan makes sense,” but he could not give a definitive answer to the question as it was “still early in this process.” The correspondent also had brought up the issue of Americans being able to keep their health care plan if they wanted to. Again, the president reaffirmed his former statement.⁷⁶⁴

On July 22, 2009, Obama held a prime-time press conference in the East Room of the White House, which was nationally televised and had a focus on health care reform. This focus also became evident in the correspondent’s questions, which were mainly on health care reform. In a long opening statement, the president covered points he wanted to stress concerning the reform, and several correspondents came back to points of his opening statement during their questions.⁷⁶⁵ In how far Obama managed to steer the questions of the media with his opening statement cannot be answered, though. It is impossible to distinguish between the influence of the opening statement and the general focus of the press conference on health care.

The press conference was very typical for President Obama. He answered questions elaborately, explaining in detail connections and his line of thought. For example, on one financing question, Obama began his 740 words long answer, which equals nearly four-and-a-half minutes, with “Well, before we talk about how to pay for it, let's talk about what exactly needs to be done.”⁷⁶⁶ Even though Obama answered the simple follow-up question on whether it was his “job to get a deal done,” with a short and definite “Absolutely, it’s my job. I’m the President,” he then continued with a 460 words (three minutes) addition on cost reductions.⁷⁶⁷

The president was also a master in evading questions eloquently and talking about issues he wanted to address. When Jake Tapper asked Obama whether “the American people are going to have to give anything up” due to the planned cost reductions (e.g., choice of doctors, certain care, etc.), the president began his answer with: “They're going to have to give up paying for things that don't make them healthier. And I – speaking as an American, I think that's the kind of change you want.” He then continued to elaborate on unnecessarily repeated physical examinations, which cost Americans more money, and cheaper but

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁵ “The President's News Conference | July 22, 2009,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1121> (accessed July 25, 2022).

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid; “President Obama's Primetime Press Conference on Health Reform | July 22, 2009 | Video,” July 23, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNGKxgHJ2iU> (accessed December 7, 2022), 08:34–12:56.

⁷⁶⁷ “The President's News Conference | July 22, 2009”; “President Obama's Primetime Press Conference on Health Reform | July 22, 2009 | Video,” 13:00-16:00.

equally efficient medication. Moreover, he explained why reforming the health care system was important to reduce the deficit. None of this hinted at nor did it deny any negative impacts Americans might encounter through health care reform. After nearly 970 words, which equals about six-and-a-half minutes, one had easily forgotten the actual question which basically remained unanswered.⁷⁶⁸ The president at the same time had gotten out the information to the media and the public he wanted to talk about and had tried to evade a politically dangerous question. Yet, this time, the latter was not successful, Steve Koff from *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* took up the issue later during the press conference:

To follow up on Jake's question earlier [...] One, can you guarantee that this legislation will lock in and say the government will never deny any services, that that's going to be decided by the doctor and the patient, and the government will not deny any coverage? And secondarily, can you, as a symbolic gesture, say that you and the Congress will abide by the same benefits in that public option?⁷⁶⁹

After a typical longer introductory part, Obama came back to the original question. This time, he gave a straight answer, although he managed to rephrase the question so that it was easier to answer in a positive way, making it sound like the changes would only be beneficial for everybody:

Now, [...] can I guarantee that there are going to be no changes in the health care delivery system? No. The whole point of this is to try to encourage changes that work for the American people and make them healthier. [...] And part of what we want to do is to make sure that those decisions are being made by doctors and medical experts based on evidence, based on what works, because that's not how it's working right now. [...] Right now doctors a lot of times are forced to make decisions based on the fee payment schedule that's out there.⁷⁷⁰

The president continued to elaborate on the last point and ended his answer with a humorous remark and direct response to the second question the reporter had posed, causing the room to chuckle:

You know, I would be happy to abide by the same benefit package. I will just be honest with you: I'm the President of the United States, so I've got a doctor following me every minute – [laughter] – which is why I say this is not about me. I've got the best health care in the

⁷⁶⁸ “The President's News Conference | July 22, 2009”; “President Obama's Primetime Press Conference on Health Reform | July 22, 2009 | Video,” 25:57–33:25.

⁷⁶⁹ “The President's News Conference | July 22, 2009.”

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid.

world. I'm trying to make sure that everybody has good health care, and they don't right now.⁷⁷¹

As mentioned before, for Obama such small humorous remarks were quite typical, and he would do that again during the next question after a mix-up of reporters. This demonstrates Obama's ability to occasionally lighten the mood with his humorous manner.

When faced with a more challenging and provocative question, the president showed the calm he was known for. Referring to the transparency of the Obama administration, which would become a major issue over the course of Obama's presidency, Christi Parsons of the *Chicago Tribune* asked the following:

During the campaign you promised that health care negotiations would take place on C-SPAN, and that hasn't happened. And your administration recently turned down a request from a watchdog group seeking a list of health care executives who have visited the White House to talk about health care reform. [...] So my question for you is, are you fulfilling your promise of transparency in the White House?⁷⁷²

The president gave an evading answer, which was – for him – relatively short with only about one-minute-and-a-half:

Well, on the list of health care executives who've visited us, most of the time you guys have been in there taking pictures, so it hasn't been a secret. And my understanding is we just sent a letter out providing a full list of all the executives. But frankly, these have mostly been at least photo sprays where you could see who was participating.

With respect to all the negotiations not being on C-SPAN, you will recall, in this very room, that our kickoff event was here on C-SPAN, and at a certain point, you start getting into all kinds of different meetings – Senate Finance is having a meeting; the House is having a meeting. If they wanted those to be on C-SPAN, then I would welcome it. I don't think there are a lot of secrets going on in there.⁷⁷³

Obama did not directly answer the question on the “promise of transparency” but went through the different examples Parsons had brought up. He played down the issue by arguing that most of the events were known or published by C-SPAN. Here, too, the President used his eloquence to reject the accusation of non-transparency. He even managed to make it look as if the administration was very transparent.

Yet, overall, this was a very typical conference for the president. Obama went calmly through and eloquently evaded some questions and let his humorous character shine

⁷⁷¹ Ibid; “President Obama's Primetime Press Conference on Health Reform | July 22, 2009 | Video,” 48:54-49:21.

⁷⁷² “The President's News Conference | July 22, 2009.”

⁷⁷³ Ibid; “President Obama's Primetime Press Conference on Health Reform | July 22, 2009 | Video,” 37:00-38:19.

through several times. With that he managed to portray an image of a knowledgeable and eloquent leader, who skillfully fielded the press corps' questions to the public.

Obama was not asked any more questions on health care reform during his last two solo press conferences of the year in September and December.⁷⁷⁴ He held his first solo press conference of 2010 on February 9 in the Press Briefing Room. It would be the last one before he signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act on March 23, 2010.⁷⁷⁵ Obama reported in his opening statement on the meeting he had had with Republican and Democratic leaders of Congress, joking that the “meeting went very well. In fact, I understand [then Senate Minority Leader Mitch] McConnell and [then Senate Majority Leader Harry] Reid are out doing snow angels on the South Lawn together,” which caused the room to chuckle. The President also briefly reported on the discussions during the meeting on health care reform.⁷⁷⁶

Obama stayed for only about thirty minutes of the press conference, after which his Press Secretary Gibbs talked to the press for another thirty minutes. Out of six correspondents who were called on by Obama, two asked questions on health care reform.⁷⁷⁷ The president gave his typical longer answers and went into detail. His sense of humor also showed again when he brought up bipartisanship in one of his answers:

Bipartisanship cannot mean simply that Democrats give up everything that they believe in, find the handful of things that Republicans have been advocating for and we do those things, and then we have bipartisanship. That's not how it works in any other realm of life. That's certainly not how it works in my marriage with Michelle, although I usually do give in most of the time. [Laughter]⁷⁷⁸

The general atmosphere at the press conference was relaxed and calm, and exchanges were very friendly.⁷⁷⁹ Obama seemed to be pleased with the press conference as he left with the note: “Thank you, guys. That was pretty good. Thanks.”⁷⁸⁰

⁷⁷⁴ “The President's News Conference in Pittsburgh | September 25, 2009,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-pittsburgh> (accessed August 3, 2022); “The President's News Conference in Copenhagen | December 18, 2009,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-copenhagen> (accessed August 3, 2022).

⁷⁷⁵ “The President's News Conference | February 09, 2010,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1120> (accessed August 3, 2022).

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁹ “President Obama Holds Press Conference | February 9, 2010 | Video,” *The Obama White House YouTube Channel*, February 10, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMW2cf57beY> (accessed December 7, 2022), 00:00–32:36.

⁷⁸⁰ “The President's News Conference | February 09, 2010.”

So far, the evidence from the press conferences confirms what Obama was known for: elaborate answers, eloquence, and humor, all of which he frequently used to evade questions. During the 28 solo press conferences of the following three years and nine months, President Obama was only asked on the ACA during four of them, and even then, did not receive many questions. However, this would change in November 2013.

As the law's major provision became effective in 2014, the roll-out should have been in its final stages during Obama's press conference on November 14, 2013, in the Press Briefing Room. However, the government's website that people should have used to sign up for health insurance did not work properly. Due to persistent technical problems, many users were for example unable to enroll.⁷⁸¹ The opening statement of the November 14 press conference centered around the Affordable Care Act. Obama stressed the achievements of the law, but also discussed the problems that emerged. He stated that the government was working on getting the website run smoothly. Moreover, one of the president's key promises regarding health care reform was under threat. Many Americans had received cancellation notices by their insurers, which clearly contradicted Obama's assurance that every American who liked their health care plan will be able to keep it. Obama used his opening statement to directly address the affected persons:

Now, as I indicated earlier, I completely get how upsetting this can be for a lot of Americans, particularly after assurances they heard from me that if they had a plan that they liked, they could keep it. And to those Americans, I hear you loud and clear. I said that I would do everything we can to fix this problem. And today I'm offering an idea that will help do it.

Already, people who have plans that predate the Affordable Care Act can keep those plans if they haven't changed. That was already in the law. That's what's called a grandfather clause. It was included in the law. Today we're going to extend that principle both to people whose plans have changed since the law took effect and to people who bought plans since the law took effect.⁷⁸²

The president was very honest about the problem and brought with him a solution for affected Americans. Moreover, he openly discussed the mismanaged rollout during his press conference, admitting that "the rollout has been rough so far" and that "we fumbled."⁷⁸³ Overall, the president took responsibility for the mistakes and tried to provide a satisfactory solution for people who got cancellation notices.

⁷⁸¹ Michael Nelson, "Barack Obama: Domestic Affairs."

⁷⁸² "The President's News Conference | November 14, 2013," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1150> (accessed July 27, 2022).

⁷⁸³ Ibid.

Obama did only call on five reporters at this press conference, which did not give many correspondents a chance to ask the president questions. As he was in a situation where he had to explain and take responsibility for problems that occurred with the ACA, he tried to limit his exposure to critical questions. Correspondents tried to get in more questions by asking two questions at once and often followed-up on issues.⁷⁸⁴

Out of the five correspondents who got to pose questions, four asked the president on the Affordable Care Act. Two questions were answered by Obama in his typical long style, but he gave the information requested. However, there were two unusual exchanges between Obama and correspondents.

The president called on Major Garret from *CBS News* as the second correspondent, who asked two questions and one follow-up. At least two of them were phrased provocatively, however they were posed in a normal conversational tone.⁷⁸⁵ Garret started with the following question:

You said while the law was being debated, ‘if you like your plan, you can keep it.’ You said after the law was implemented or signed, ‘if you like your plan, you can keep it.’ Americans believed you, sir, when you said that to them over and over.

[...]

Do you not believe, sir, the American people deserve a deeper, more transparent accountability from you as to why you said that over and over when your own statistic published in the Federal Register alerted your policy staff – and I presume you – to the fact that millions of Americans would, in fact, probably fall into the very gap you're trying to administratively fix now?⁷⁸⁶

In his second question, he accused the administration of carrying out the rollout despite knowing about the problems:

You were informed, or several people in this building were informed, 2 weeks before the launch of the web site that it was failing the most basic tests internally, and yet a decision was made to launch the website on October 1. Did you, sir, make that test? And if so, did you regret that?⁷⁸⁷

The president did not show any signs of irritation in response to the provocatively phrased question and strongly denied the presumptions Garret made:

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁵ “Obama's Full Question and Answer on the Affordable Care Act | November 14, 2013 | Video,” *The Washington Post*, November 14, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/obamas-full-question-and-answer-on-the-affordable-care-act/2013/11/14/c53ed06c-4d5a-11e3-9890-a1e0997fb0c0_video.html (accessed December 7, 2022), 13:25-14:16.

⁷⁸⁶ “The President's News Conference | November 14, 2013.”

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid.

Okay, on the web site, I was not informed directly that the web site would not be working the way it was supposed to. Had I been informed, I wouldn't be going out saying, boy, this is going to be great.

I'm accused of a lot of things, but I don't think I'm stupid enough to go around saying, this is going to be like shopping on Amazon or Travelocity a week before the web site opens if I thought that it wasn't going to work. So clearly, we and I did not have enough awareness about the problems in the web site. [...] So that doesn't excuse the fact that they just don't work. [...] we would not have rolled out something knowing very well that it wasn't going to work the way it was supposed, given all the scrutiny that we knew was going to be on the web site.⁷⁸⁸

Garret then asked a very provocative follow-up question, implying that the president intentionally misled Americans:

Did you decide, sir, that the simple declaration was something the American people could handle, but this nuanced answer you just gave now was something that you couldn't handle and you didn't trust the American people with a fuller truth?⁷⁸⁹

Obama, at this point looking irritated by the question, knitting his brows but talking in the same tone, had the following to say:

No. I think, as I said earlier, Major, my expectation was that for 98 percent of the American people, either it genuinely wouldn't change at all or they'd be pleasantly surprised with the options in the marketplace, and that the grandfather clause would cover the rest.

That proved not to be the case. And that's on me. And the American people – those who got cancellation notices do deserve and have received an apology from me. But they don't want just words, what they want is whether we can make sure that they are in a better place and that we meet that commitment. [...] But it is something that we intend to fix.⁷⁹⁰

Obama – in a for him relatively few-worded answer – reiterated his stance that the current problems came as a surprise and straight away called on the next correspondent to evade further questions by Garret.

Hidden in an extremely long answer of over eleven minutes to the last question of the press conference, Obama said something interesting on the media's reporting:

I mean, right now everybody is properly focused on us not doing a good job on the rollout, and that's legitimate, and I get it. There have been times where I thought we were kind of slapped around a little bit unjustly. This one is deserved. Right? It's on us.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid; “Obama's Full Question and Answer on the Affordable Care Act | November 14, 2013 | Video,” 14:17-15:27.

⁷⁸⁹ “The President's News Conference | November 14, 2013.”

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid; “Obama's Full Question and Answer on the Affordable Care Act | November 14, 2013 | Video,” 20:28-21:24, 22:02-22:05.

[...]

But part of this job is the things that go right, you guys aren't going to write about; the things that go wrong get prominent attention. That's how it has always been. That's not unique to me as President. And I'm up to the challenge. We're going to get this done.

All right? Thank you, everybody.⁷⁹¹

This is particularly interesting as President Obama ended the whole press conference with the last paragraph, making the last thing the correspondents heard from the president to be criticism on their reporting and not giving them a chance to question him on his statement. Not only does this show that he and his team felt that the media's coverage generally focused too much on problems, but it is consistent with Obama's effort to use social media to bypass the press and go directly to the people with his desired message as much as possible.

Overall, one can observe Obama's calm nature. He came well prepared knowing that he would face critical questioning. He was irritated, but not visibly angered by questions, stayed on message, and got his points across.⁷⁹²

During the last press conference of the year correspondents typically ask questions that require the president to look back on and assess the last 12 months. On December 20, 2013, president called on eleven correspondents during his one-hour press conference. Several had follow-up or multi-part questions. The overall atmosphere was relaxed, and the president and correspondents seemed to be in a good mood, which was likely due to the Christmas spirit. Correspondents did ask some challenging questions but also several simple ones. The president answered all of them in his typical calm and at times lecturing manner.⁷⁹³

Obama began his opening statement with a joke that alluded to the pre-Christmas season, stating that "You know what they say: It's the most wonderful press conference of the year," causing some laughs in the room. He shortly mentioned the ACA, talking about the

⁷⁹¹ "The President's News Conference | November 14, 2013"; "Obama's Full Question and Answer on the Affordable Care Act | November 14, 2013 | Video," 40:26-51:30. Specific quote 47:02-47:22, 51:12-51:30.

⁷⁹² "Obama's Full Question and Answer on the Affordable Care Act | November 14, 2013 | Video," 00:00-51:30.

⁷⁹³ "The President's News Conference | December 20, 2013," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1151> (accessed August 9, 2022); "President Obama Holds a News Conference | December 20, 2013 | Video," *The Obama White House YouTube Channel*, December 21, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDBEUYDU22I> (accessed December 7, 2022).

achievements of the law besides the troubles that had occurred.⁷⁹⁴ At the end of his opening statement, the president directly addressed military personnel serving around the world:

Of course, a lot of our men and women in uniform are still overseas, and a lot of them are still spending their Christmas far away from their family and their friends, and in some cases, are still in harm's way. So I want to close by saying to them and their families back home, we want to thank you. Your country stands united in supporting you and being grateful for your service and your sacrifice. We will keep you in our thoughts and in our prayers during this season of hope.⁷⁹⁵

While uttering these words, Obama looked straight into the camera, and one got the feeling that he was talking right to them. Here, the president used his televised press conferences as a means to directly talk to a specific group of people.⁷⁹⁶

Julie Pace of the *Associated Press* asked the first question. She wanted the president to evaluate his last year in terms of what he was aiming for and what he ended up achieving:

When you look back at this year, very little of the domestic agenda that you outlined in your Inaugural Address and your State of the Union have been achieved. Health care rollout obviously had huge problems, and your ratings from the public are near historic lows for you. When you take this all together, has this been the worst year of your Presidency?⁷⁹⁷

Such a slightly provocatively posed question – especially being the first one asked during the conference – could cause the president to be taken aback, however, the opposite was true in this case. Obama genuinely had to laugh when he heard the question, before answering:

I've got to tell you, Julie, that's not how I think about it. I have now been in office 5 years – close to 5 years – was running for President for 2 years before that, and for those of you who have covered me during that time, we have had ups, and we have had downs. I think this room has probably recorded at least 15 near-death experiences.⁷⁹⁸

The president then continued his answer by going into more details on frustrations and successes of the year.⁷⁹⁹ Obama's reaction here fits well into the general characterization of Obama, who is said to have a calm and restrained personality. Thus, such a question would hardly trigger an open emotional response. But it also seems like he genuinely found the question amusing, which caused his instant reaction with a laugh.

⁷⁹⁴ “The President's News Conference | December 20, 2013”; “President Obama Holds a News Conference | December 20, 2013 | Video,” 00:00–07:12.

⁷⁹⁵ “The President's News Conference | December 20, 2013.”

⁷⁹⁶ “President Obama Holds a News Conference | December 20, 2013 | Video,” 06:26–06:55.

⁷⁹⁷ “The President's News Conference | December 20, 2013.”

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid.

About halfway through the press conference, when asked in a follow-up question what his New Year's resolution was, Obama answered smiling "to be nicer to the White House Press Corps. [Laughter] You know? Absolutely." This made correspondents laugh and someone even applauded.⁸⁰⁰ Although such a statement would almost always elicit a positive reaction from the press corps, the laughter and applause also indicated that the press corps would not have minded the new resolution. Implementation on the part of the president, however, is another matter. Looking at Obama's relationship with the media, implementation seemed to have been lacking, at least in the eyes of the media.

Overall, Obama answered most questions in his typical elaborate style and correspondents asked direct but also very expectable questions. However, this press conference had a more congenial atmosphere, which the coming holidays surely contributed to.

The next solo press conference was nearly five months later, on April 17, 2014. During his opening statement in the Press Briefing Room, Obama focused on the Affordable Care Act. He stressed positive developments since the enactment of the law like the higher number of people with health insurance. The press conference was relatively short with being a little over half an hour and the general atmosphere was calm and polite. Three of the five correspondents who were called on asked questions concerned with the law.⁸⁰¹

Of the three interchanges connected to the ACA, two were normal exchanges between the correspondent and the president, where Obama – in his typical explanatory style – answered the questions asked. The first question on the ACA during the press conference by Tamara Keith from *National Public Radio* started off with a humorous exchange. After the correspondent began her question with "regarding the Affordable Care Act," the president interrupted her and jokingly said "Yes, let's talk about that." This caused the room to chuckle as Obama alluded to the large amount of coverage the ACA had received in the past months and the many repeal votes Republicans had held. In his opening statement he had also argued to now "refocus [...] on the issues that the American people are most concerned about."⁸⁰²

Later during his answer to Keith's question, when he was about to call on the next correspondent, he stopped himself, but also realized that he had already talked for about

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid; "President Obama Holds a News Conference | December 20, 2013 | Video," 35:01-35:20.

⁸⁰¹ "The President's News Conference | April 17, 2014," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1149> (accessed August 5, 2022); "President Obama Speaks to the Press | April 17, 2014 | Video," *The Obama White House YouTube Channel*, April 17, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BTOvPwVtpo> (accessed December 7, 2022).

⁸⁰² "The President's News Conference | April 17, 2014"; "President Obama Speaks to the Press | April 17, 2014 | Video," 15:50-15:58.

five minutes, and said: “I’m sorry, I’m going to say one last thing about this – [laughter].” His acknowledgement caused the room to chuckle but also shows that Obama was aware of his long answers. This indicates that he simply did not want to change his answering style besides criticism by the press corps. But to his credit, he then kept his further answer to under one minute.⁸⁰³ Overall, this was a very typical press conference with no unusual exchanges or incidents.

In the following 25 solo press conferences Obama held during his remaining time as president, he was rarely asked on the Affordable Care Act, in fact, in most conferences there was not even one question on the law. This could be attributed to the fact that the law had become established, and glitches had been erased. Moreover, it must be kept in mind that issues surrounding the ACA could also be addressed in different settings. For instance, when the third Supreme Court case, *King v. Burwell*, was decided, Obama delivered remarks in the Rose Garden but did not hold a press conference. Until the next press conference, this issue was likely fully covered and open questions had been asked in other settings.⁸⁰⁴

President Obama was not asked explicitly on the Affordable Care Act during his last press conference on January 18, 2017. The only time the signature law came up was indirectly in a question on a conversation he had had with president-elect Donald Trump. Asked about whether Obama could “convince him [Trump] to take a fresh look at” central issues of Obama’s presidency as for instance “maintaining some semblance of the Affordable Care Act,” Obama argued that the complexity of the job may alter some of Trump’s current beliefs, yet one would only be able to tell once he was in office.⁸⁰⁵

However, he had quite a lot to say about his own relationship with the press during his time in office, joking about disagreements and acknowledging his preference for long answers:

I want [...] to thank all of you. Some of you have been covering me for a long time; [...]. I've offered advice that I thought was pretty sound like, ‘Don't do stupid stuff.’ [Laughter] And even when you complained about my long answers, I just want you to know that the only reason they were long was because you asked six-part questions. [Laughter]⁸⁰⁶

⁸⁰³ “The President's News Conference | April 17, 2014”; “President Obama Speaks to the Press | April 17, 2014 | Video,” 16:27-21:28. The president stopped himself 20:47.

⁸⁰⁴ Barack H. Obama, “Remarks on the United States Supreme Court Ruling on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act,” *The American Presidency Project*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-united-states-supreme-court-ruling-the-patient-protection-and-affordable-care> (accessed August 24, 2022).

⁸⁰⁵ “The President's News Conference | January 18, 2017,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1084> (accessed August 24, 2022).

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid.

Obama stated that he appreciated working with everyone, but could not resist a little criticism:

But I have enjoyed working with all of you. That does not, of course, mean that I've enjoyed every story that you have filed. But that's the point of this relationship. You're not supposed to be sycophants, you're supposed to be skeptics. You're supposed to ask me tough questions. You're not supposed to be complimentary, but you're supposed to cast a critical eye on folks who hold enormous power and make sure that we are accountable to the people who sent us here.⁸⁰⁷

Yet he remained cautious in his criticism and used humor to soften it:

And you've done it, for the most part, in ways that I could appreciate for fairness even if I didn't always agree with your conclusions. And having you in this building has made this place work better. It keeps us honest. It makes us work harder. [...]

And for example, every time you've asked, 'Why haven't you cured Ebola yet?' or 'Why is there that – still that hole in the Gulf?' it has given me the ability to go back to my team and say, 'Will you get this solved before the next press conference?' [Laughter]

[...] I'm looking forward to being an active consumer of your work rather than always the subject of it. I want to thank you all for your extraordinary service to our democracy.⁸⁰⁸

Obama acknowledged the natural tension between the president and the media and that there were times he also felt this tension. He affirmed that he had not always been happy about the media coverage but valued the press corps' general fairness. In hindsight, such a statement is surely easier to make than when being in the center of critical media coverage. Yet, the president was not finished. He also gave some hints on what he thought was to come with his successor:

Now, I spent a lot of time [...] in my Farewell Address talking about the state of our democracy. It goes without saying that essential to that is a free press. That is part of how this place, this country, this grand experiment in self-government has to work. It doesn't work if we don't have a well-informed citizenry. And you are the conduit through which they receive the information about what's taking place in the halls of power.⁸⁰⁹

Obama emphasized that democracy needs a free press

to establish a baseline of facts and evidence that we can use as a starting point for the kind of reasoned and informed debates that ultimately lead to progress. And so my hope is, is that you will continue with the same tenacity that you showed us to do the hard work of getting

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid. President Obama told correspondents in an off-the-record session that his foreign policy was, "Don't do stupid shit." As several administration officials mentioned this phrase to reporters later, they thought it was on-the-record, it got printed, which angered the Obama administration.

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid.

to the bottom of stories and getting them right and to push those of us in power to be the best version of ourselves and to push this country to be the best version of itself.

I have no doubt that you will do so.⁸¹⁰

These were some grave words by the president, who in a veiled way, warned them of the coming times and his successor. It is very telling that at the end of the press conference, Obama wished the press corps “Good luck.”⁸¹¹

What comes through in the analysis of President Obama’s press conferences are his character traits. His calm and considerate as well – as some complained at times – emotionless manner made him less likely to get visibly angry at provocative questions and made it easier for him to stay on message. Furthermore, his eloquence helped him for him to dodge questions or rephrase questions to match them to his preferred answer. This was not something the press corps liked as it made it harder to get a reaction or straight answer from the president. Moreover, his preference for elaboratively explaining his policies did not fit well during the setting of a press conference as it would lead to extensive answers and less time for questions. Here, Obama was not able or willing to adjust to the setting, causing frustration within the press corps who would have liked to ask more questions. The White House press corps tried to make good use of the time available to them with multi-part questions or follow-up questions. Yet, all these factors diminished the usefulness of the press conferences for the White House press corps as it was harder for them to get the information they wanted. On top of this came the in general few exchanges with reporters Obama had (see VI.2), making it even more difficult for them to get valuable information.⁸¹²

However, reading the transcripts and watching the available videos of the press conferences, it is hard to recognize the friction between the Obama White House and the White House press corps. The tone was polite, and the interaction characterized by basic mutual respect. The president and correspondents let each other finish their sentences, there were no insults or side blows as well as a general calmness in the interactions. Questions were more critical when the roll-out process did not go according to plan, yet they generally remained friendly. Moreover, there were frequent jokes and laughter during the press conferences, which would lighten the atmosphere. The president mostly did not use humor to evade questions but simply made jokes. This can likely be attributed to Obama’s

⁸¹⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹¹ Ibid.

⁸¹² Gerhard Peters, “Presidential News Conferences.”

humorous character trait shining through. Thus, the friction, regarding the limited transparency of the Obama White House and the low level of contact, did not significantly influence the ordinary process of the press conferences.

Obama still used press conferences at times to reach the American public but his lower interest in press conferences can be partially explained by the significant involvement of the media environment and the more direct tools he had at hand to communicate with the public.

4.2 Social Media and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act

As demonstrated, Obama used several internet-based communication channels to bypass the media and especially the White House press corps.⁸¹³ He also used these channels to communicate his thoughts on health care reform. There was not one specific social media channel the Obama White House focused on, but they rather used several channels simultaneously and communicated their message through all of them.

For the analysis, the three most important social media platforms that were active since the first year of Obama's presidency were consulted: *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube*. For these channels, the main official accounts were used. Personal accounts were excluded since the Obama White House had a strong focus on official government accounts. This means that for *Facebook*, the "The White House" account was used. As the president had his own official *Facebook* account under the name "President Obama" only since November 2015, the account played a minor role. For *Twitter*, mainly the official "@WhiteHouse" account was analyzed. Similar to *Facebook*, the president's own official *Twitter* account "@POTUS" was started only in May 2015, thus also this account played a tangential role for the analysis.⁸¹⁴ At times the *Twitter* account by Press Secretary Josh Earnest was used as was the White House's *YouTube* channel.⁸¹⁵

The emphasis placed on the official accounts by the White House as well as the use of several social media channels suggests that more than one person was working on

⁸¹³ Peter Baker, "Foreword," in *Columns to Characters*, viii, x.

⁸¹⁴ When the White House wanted to make clear that a tweet came directly from the president before the @POTUS account existed, Obama would "sign" the tweet of the White House *Twitter* account with his initials "bo." Yet this did not apply for the majority of tweets by the White House *Twitter* account.

⁸¹⁵ The social media post by the Obama White House were selected with the help of *The Obama White House Social Media Archive*. The archive was searched using the search terms "ACA AND Affordable Care Act AND health care," and posts were searched around dates considered important, such as the date the ACA was signed. Posts were then categorizing by their main characteristic. As the archive provides links to the posts on the social media platforms, the original posts are used for the analysis. Dates and times were extracted from the original posts by setting the computer's clock to Eastern Standard Time. There is no guarantee that they are the exact times but at last approximates. This was tested on a subset of posts.

communications. Moreover, most posts and tweets had an official, less personal tone, frequently from a third-party perspective, thus making them sound like official White House communication. Although a lot of focus is put on the president due to the presidential system, this combination implies that social media communication was the product of coordinated teamwork and generally an official part of the overall White House communications. As a team was working on the communication efforts, when talking about the usage of social media by Obama, it is referred to the Obama White House or the Obama administration. Therefore, in the course of the analysis, the pronoun “they” is used for the Obama White House. If a post or a tweet can be clearly attributed to the president or the press secretary, this is made clear by naming the respective person.

After Obama left office, the official accounts (e.g., @WhiteHouse or @POTUS) were handed over to the next administration. To preserve the social media content of the Obama administration, accounts were renamed and archived. For example, the @POTUS account was handed over with an empty timeline (but with all followers) to the Trump White House and all content posted under the @POTUS account from Obama’s time in office can now be found under @POTUS44.⁸¹⁶ Thus, it must be considered that today’s account names are different from the ones during Obama’s time in office.

Many of the administration’s social media posts on the ACA were what would be classified as informative posts. These are, for instance, announcements of events, live tickers, or quotes of Obama during events connected to health care reform or references to other social media posts. Overall, these posts would be simple information the White House wanted to get to the public. For instance, on June 3, 2009, the Obama White House published a note on Facebook on the president’s vision for health care, which was also posted on the White House website and referenced in a tweet by @WhiteHouse. This was information on what the president did and what he wanted for health care reform.⁸¹⁷

⁸¹⁶ Kori Schulman, “The Digital Transition: How the Presidential Transition Works in the Social Media Age,” *The Obama White House*, October 31, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/10/31/digital-transition-how-presidential-transition-works-social-media-age> (accessed October 26, 2022); Kori Schulman, “The Obama Administration Digital Transition: Moving Forward,” *The Obama White House*, January 17, 2017, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2017/01/17/obama-administration-digital-transition-moving-forward> (accessed October 26, 2022) More detailed information on all government account and their archival and renaming process can also be found under these sources.

⁸¹⁷ “The President Spells Out His Vision on Health Care Reform,” *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, June 3, 2009, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-obama-white-house/the-president-spells-out-his-vision-on-health-care-reform/220796850192/> (accessed December 7, 2022); “Tweet on June 03, 2009, 6:14 P.M. EST,” *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/2021966812> (accessed December 7, 2022).

Similarly, before the major problems with the law roll-out occurred, several informative tweets were sent out via the official White House *Twitter* account at the end of September 2013 on the health care law, promoting the enrollment period:

One week from today, millions of uninsured Americans can sign up for affordable health insurance —> <http://HealthCare.gov> #Obamacare.⁸¹⁸

Moreover, they frequently stressed benefits of the law, informing followers on the positive changes the law would bring to Americans:

FACT: 100 days from now, insurance companies won't be able to limit your lifetime coverage for essential health benefits. #Obamacare.⁸¹⁹

In such informative posts, the White House stayed neutral, and the aim was to inform the followers on the Affordable Care Act. Yet, there were also social media posts which were not only informative but also had an emotional component to them. For example, with the following tweet the White House responded to a social media push tailored against the Affordable Care Act:

#DefundObamacare if you want to prevent millions of uninsured Americans from getting affordable health insurance. #EnoughAlready.⁸²⁰

A similar tweet warned that the defunding of Obamacare would mean higher health care charges for women.⁸²¹

Moreover, the White House went even further and tried to unite the audience behind the added hashtag “EnoughAlready.”⁸²² Besides *Twitter*, the Obama White House also posted similar or identical messages on *Facebook*. One post read:

⁸¹⁸ “Tweet on September 24, 2013, 1:56 P.M. EST,” @ObamaWhiteHouse *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/382564308594343936> (accessed December 7, 2022). Another example from about a week later: “Starting tomorrow, uninsured Americans can sign up for quality, affordable health insurance —> <http://hc.gov/CZco9T> #GetCovered #Obamacare.” This tweet can be found under: “Tweet on September 30, 2013, 11:16 A.M. EST,” @ObamaWhiteHouse *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/384698163690348544> (accessed December 7, 2022).

⁸¹⁹ “Tweet on September 23, 2013, 6:45 P.M. EST,” @ObamaWhiteHouse *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/382274594251345921> (accessed December 7, 2022). A further exemplary tweet on the benefits of the ACA: “Worth a RT: Thanks to #Obamacare, signing up for health insurance just got 17 pages easier —> go.wh.gov/ZvyhVv #GetCovered.” This tweet can be found under: “Tweet on September 30, 2013, 12:15 P.M. EST,” @ObamaWhiteHouse *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/384713005314748416> (accessed December 7, 2022).

⁸²⁰ “Tweet on September 24, 2013, 9:38 A.M. EST,” @ObamaWhiteHouse *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/382499385470226432> (accessed December 7, 2022).

⁸²¹ “Tweet on September 24, 2013, 2:19 P.M. EST,” @ObamaWhiteHouse *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/382570082464829440> (accessed December 7, 2022).

⁸²² For further information on how hashtags work refer to Kasturi Bhattacharjee and Linda Petzold, “Probabilistic User-Level Opinion Detection on Online Social Networks,” in *Social Informatics: 6th International Conference, SocInfo 2014, Barcelona, Spain, November 11-13, 2014 Proceedings*, ed. Luca M. Ariello and Daniel McFarland, 309–25 (Heidelberg: Springer, 2014), 314.

It's time to help our fellow Americans #GetCovered – not deny health care to millions.
<http://go.wh.gov/wyfwDi>.⁸²³

They further added a picture with a quote of Obama besides the post reading:

Republicans' biggest fear at this point is not that the Affordable Care Act will fail. What they're worried about is it's going to succeed.⁸²⁴

In addition, there were some more direct (but still polite) attacks on Republicans and their politics trying to delay reform or later abolish the ACA. In one tweet, the White House argued that

The GOP plan to delay #Obamacare would raise premiums and decrease coverage by 11 million in 2014.⁸²⁵

Although these posts are characterized by a stronger emotionality than the neutral informative posts, their information content outweighed their emotional content. Thus, they still classify as informative posts with which the White House wanted to spread information on the ACA.

Yet, the White House did not only use informative posts, but they also used strongly emotional content to achieve an emotional reaction by the reader or viewer. They for example did so by sharing stories from Americans affected by the ACA. In posts on *Facebook* ordinary Americans described how their health (care) was positively affected by the Affordable Care Act. At the end of January 2011, the White House posted video stories embedded on *Facebook* like “Cathy from Ohio” or “James from Texas.” In the latter, James Howard recounts how he was unable to pay for his brain cancer treatment and how a program – installed through the ACA – bridging the time until the law would be rolled out, allowed him to continue his treatments at more reasonable costs.⁸²⁶

Another time when the White House used emotions to gain support was in 2015, when Republicans once again tried to repeal the law. Obama met with Americans who had benefited from the ACA and had written letters to him about their stories. The White House

⁸²³ “Facebook Post on September 26, 2013, 9:00 P.M. EST,” *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/WhiteHouse/photos/a.158628314237.115142.63811549237/10151941565009238/?type=3> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸²⁵ “Tweet on September 23, 2013, 4:00 P.M. EST,” *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/382233076857708544> (accessed December 7, 2022).

⁸²⁶ “Voices of Health Care Reform: James from Texas | January 25, 2011 | Video,” *The Obama White House YouTube Channel*, January 25, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130604230013/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoHrlsOEqkI> (accessed December 7, 2022); “Facebook Post on January 25, 2011, 11:49 A.M. EST,” *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/posts/196399480375799> (accessed December 8, 2022). The video was retrieved through the Internet Archive *WayBackMachine* as it is otherwise not available anymore.

shared a video on *YouTube* of the meeting, which was also advertised on *Twitter* and *Facebook*. In the video, participants talk to the president about their health journey. These stories provided highly emotional content, with misty-eyed people describing their situation without the ACA and the positive influence of the law on their lives. For example, one woman described how she was able to receive life-saving surgery thanks to the ACA.⁸²⁷ With such videos the White House tried to show that the ACA was strongly benefiting Americans, at times even being the lifesaving change of circumstance. The stories were not only more emotional because of the tragic experiences of the people, but, because they were told by “ordinary” Americans, they were also much more believable than just government fact sheets. With the emotional posts, the Obama White House intended to improve the reputation of the law by evoking an emotional response and make its effects more tangible.

YouTube was used in a second way: Obama was the first president to videotape weekly addresses which were uploaded to the platform.⁸²⁸ The idea for addresses targeted directly to the public was not entirely new. The first president to use such addresses very successfully was Franklin D. Roosevelt with his famous but infrequent Fireside Chats on radio. President Ronald Reagan would introduce the next major change by holding weekly radio addresses.⁸²⁹ Obama’s videos were typically a couple of minutes long and perfectly fitted the 44th president’s character and preference as they allowed him to talk about one subject in more detail. With uploading them on *YouTube*, it was easy to go around the media and directly deliver his message to the American people. He frequently used this medium for health care reform and the ACA.

On July 18, 2009, before the law was passed, Obama talked about why he thought health care reform was necessary and should not be postponed. In the about six-and-a-half-minute long weekly address that was shared on *YouTube*, Obama directly addresses the audience with “Today I want to speak with you” and talked about several issues regarding health care reform that concerned Americans and were discussed by the media and opponents.

⁸²⁷ “Letters to the President: Impact of the Affordable Care Act | February 5, 2015 | Video,” *The Obama White House YouTube Channel*, February 5, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Muetf_lm240 (accessed December 7, 2022); “Tweet on February 05, 2015, 1:15 P.M. EST,” *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/563400609655955456> (accessed December 8, 2022); “Facebook Post on February 04, 2015, 9:30 P.M. EST,” *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/WhiteHouse/photos/a.158628314237.115142.63811549237/10153185779154238/?type=3> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸²⁸ Addresses were also broadcast on television and radio.

⁸²⁹ “Biden Revives Presidential Tradition, Releasing First Weekly Address,” *NPR*, February 6, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/06/964889898/biden-revives-presidential-tradition-releasing-first-weekly-address> (accessed September 27, 2022).

He called on Congress to act, referenced stories of Americans who were negatively affected by the current health care system situation and went on to counter the arguments brought forth by opponents of health care reform. As he did elsewhere, he issued the later controversial reassurance: “If you like your doctor, you keep your doctor. If you like your current insurance, you keep that insurance. Period, end of story.”⁸³⁰

Two days after the Supreme Court decision of June 2015 upholding the tax subsidies for eligible persons, Obama’s weekly address announced: “The Affordable Care Act Is Here to Stay.”⁸³¹ Obama began his nearly three-minute-long address with an informal “Hi, everybody,” giving the set-up a very personal atmosphere. The president continued to declare that the law had survived several challenges, “still stands, it is working, and it is here to stay.” He continued to lay out the advantages of the ACA for the American people and its achievements over the past years. Obama ended his address with an appeal to move forward, “stop refigting battles that have been settled again and again. [...] and keep building something better” for future generations.⁸³² These videos made it possible for President Obama to bring across his points to the American public without a filter by the media or direct criticism by opponents and allowed the president to connect more with his viewer through their more personal atmosphere.

The Obama White House used a combination of informative and emotional content as well as various social media channels to circumvent the media and directly address the American public. By not only spreading the message but by encouraging the public to actively participate in the exchange, they took their social media use one step further. A relatively minor, but very simple and frequently used way to reach engagement was to call to retweet or share White House posts.⁸³³ Such calls typically do not result in major participation of the people, yet through regular retweet and sharing calls, the White House

⁸³⁰ Barack H. Obama, “The President's Weekly Address | July 18, 2009,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-weekly-address-133> (accessed October 5, 2022); Barack H. Obama, “Weekly Address: Health Care Reform Cannot Wait | July 18, 2009 | Video,” *The Obama White House YouTube Channel*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83FvLjsUOJg> (accessed December 7, 2022).

⁸³¹ Michael Nelson, “Barack Obama: Domestic Affairs”; Barack H. Obama, “The President's Weekly Address | June 27, 2015,” *The American Presidency Project*, June 27, 2015, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-weekly-address-240> (accessed October 5, 2022).

⁸³² Barack H. Obama, “The President's Weekly Address | June 27, 2015.”

⁸³³ For example, in September 2011 on *Facebook*: “Like and share this so your friends know where they can get quality, affordable health insurance starting next Tuesday —> <http://HealthCare.gov> #GetCovered.” Post can be found under: “Facebook Post on September 23, 2011, 12:03 P.M. EST,” *The Obama White House Facebook* Page, <https://www.facebook.com/WhiteHouse/photos/a.158628314237.115142.63811549237/10151934382364238/?type=3> (accessed December 8, 2022).

tried to keep people engaged with their content and might spark one or two offline discussions among friends.

Another way to get people talking about the subject the president wanted to was by live broadcasting select speeches or rallies through social media channels. For example, when Obama held a rally on health care reform at the University of Maryland, the White House posted on *Facebook*:

Calling All College Students: The President holds a rally for college students and health insurance reform at 11:40 EDT this morning. Watch and discuss with others, all through Facebook: <http://apps.facebook.com/whitehouselive/>.⁸³⁴

The opportunity to follow and discuss the rally live allowed people to directly engage while the president was speaking, without having to be in Maryland.

Lots of engagement was created when the White House used its social media presence and made the citizens' participation a main part of the event by, for instance, allowing them to ask the president questions. In July 2009, Obama hosted a so-called Virtual Town Hall in Annandale, Virginia: "Town Hall," since it took place on site and people could ask the president questions in person, and "Virtual," as questions could also be sent in online. In a video message a couple days prior to the town hall, Obama stated: "I want you to be a part of the conversation" and then asked followers to send in their questions on health care reform.⁸³⁵ His call was advertised on *Facebook* with a link to the White House website for further instructions:

Have questions about health care reform? The President wants to hear from you. Learn more about a [...] special town hall the [coming] Wednesday.⁸³⁶

People were asked to send in their questions as videos via *YouTube*.⁸³⁷ Out of the many videos, some were selected by staff and played during the town hall. Obama then answered these questions. Yet, it was also possible for the attending audience to ask questions and when a discussion on taxation and health care also flared up on *Twitter* and *Facebook*

⁸³⁴ "Facebook Post on September 17, 2009, 10:42 A.M. EST," *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/posts/136069790747> (accessed December 8, 2022). As the link to the White House Live *Facebook* page does not work anymore, the actual participation and reactions cannot be analyzed.

⁸³⁵ Barack H. Obama, "Obama : Speech | Video," *Dailymotion*, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x9pq1j> (accessed March 1, 2023). The video was retrieved through the *Dailymotion* website as it is otherwise not available anymore.

⁸³⁶ "Facebook Post on June 27, 2009, 3:58 P.M. EST," *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/posts/101125406122> (accessed December 9, 2022).

⁸³⁷ Macon Phillips, "A National Discussion on Health Care Reform," *The Obama White House*, June 27, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/06/27/a-national-discussion-health-care-reform> (accessed March 1, 2023). It was also possible to pose a question through *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Though according to the transcript of the Town Hall, only questions send in in video format were used.

during the town hall, they included it and asked the president on the topic. However, only seven questions – all concerning health care reform – could be asked in total, as the president’s preference for long opening remarks and long answers took up quite some time.⁸³⁸ Here the advantage of such events becomes quite clear. The White House can make a strong selection of questions and thus reduce all submitted questions to the desired ones. Compared to a press conference, where the questions are unknown, this is a clear advantage for the president. At the same time, citizens feel valued because they have the opportunity to ask the president a question. Obama held town halls frequently throughout his presidency.

However, not only was the online communication coordinated over several social media channels, but there was also a longer-term coordinated online and offline communication on the ACA. To illustrate this coordination, two occasions when the White House communicated more frequently about health care reform were selected as examples. They show in a condensed fashion how the Obama White House used its online presence and continuously combined it with typical offline communication events.⁸³⁹

The first selected period were the days around Obama prime-time press conference on July 22, 2009. The period was packed with statements, remarks, weekly addresses, and social media posts on health care reform. On July 17, President Obama gave remarks on health care where he stressed the urgency of reform.⁸⁴⁰ Information on the remarks was shared on *Twitter*, giving a link to a live stream. On *Facebook*, the White House published a note with a short summary of the nine-minute-long statement.⁸⁴¹ In addition, a video of the president giving the remarks was uploaded to the White House *YouTube* channel.⁸⁴² The

⁸³⁸ “Facebook Post on June 27, 2009, 3:58 p.m. EST”; “Remarks at a Virtual Town Hall Meeting and a Question-and-Answer Session in Annandale, Virginia | July 01, 2009,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-virtual-town-hall-meeting-and-question-and-answer-session-annandale-virginia> (accessed December 9, 2022).

⁸³⁹ Due to the large number of posts and tweets during these periods, it is not feasible to describe every single post here. Therefore, a representative selection was made to show the White House’s intertwined online and offline communication.

⁸⁴⁰ Katherine Brandon, “The President on Health Care: ‘We Are Going to Get This Done’,” *The Obama White House*, July 17, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/07/17/president-health-care-we-are-going-get-done> (accessed October 24, 2022). There is no full transcript of the remarks available on the *American Presidency Project*’s website and only the indicated condensed summary with several original passages on the archived Obama White House website.

⁸⁴¹ “Tweet on July 17, 2009, 3:52 P.M. EST,” *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/2694220521> (accessed December 7, 2022); “The President on Health Care: ‘We Are Going to Get This Done’,” *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, July 17, 2009, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-obama-white-house/the-president-on-health-care-we-are-going-to-get-this-done/246356640192/> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸⁴² Barack H. Obama, “President Obama on Health Reform: We Are Going to Get This Done | July 17, 2009 | Video,” *The Obama White House YouTube Channel*, July 18, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUE77MXuq6g> (accessed December 7, 2022).

already discussed weekly address uploaded a day later was also concerned with the necessity and urgency of health care reform.⁸⁴³ And there were also informative posts on the address on the White House *Twitter* and *Facebook* accounts.⁸⁴⁴ On July 22, Obama held his prime-time press conference with a focus on health care reform. To promote the president's appearance, the White House tweeted before the press conference:

Obama tonight on health insurance reform: "What's in this for me? ... Tonight I want to answer those questions" 8:00 PM EDT.⁸⁴⁵

Furthermore, information with links to the live stream were shared on *Twitter* and *Facebook*, with giving an option to discuss the issues of the press conference in a *Facebook* chat room.⁸⁴⁶ After the press conference links to the full video were posted on both channels and the video of the full press conference was also uploaded to *YouTube*.⁸⁴⁷ On July 25, the new weekly address again focused on health care, this time on the problems small business owners faced due to the current health care system and what would change for them through health care reform.⁸⁴⁸ It was advertised on *Facebook*, encouraging people to participate in a further exchange by stating: "Give us your comments and questions."⁸⁴⁹ Another exemplary time where several online channels were combined with offline events was the passing of and subsequent signing of the law in March 2010. Before the bill was passed, the White House reported on Obama talking to members of Congress about their vote on health care reform. Press Secretary Earnest tweeted: "Since Monday, the President has taken part in 92 meetings or phone calls with Members of Congress on health insurance

⁸⁴³ Barack H. Obama, "The President's Weekly Address | July 18, 2009."

⁸⁴⁴ "Tweet on July 18, 2009, 10:26 A.M. EST," *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/2706599374> (accessed December 7, 2022); "Weekly Address: Health Care Reform Cannot Wait," *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, July 17, 2009, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-obama-white-house/weekly-address-health-care-reform-cannot-wait/246505810192/> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸⁴⁵ "Tweet on July 22, 2009, 6:13 P.M. EST," *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/2786446136> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸⁴⁶ "Tweet on July 22, 2009, 8:01 P.M. EST," *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/2788208570> (accessed December 8, 2022); "Facebook Post on July 22, 2009, 8:15 P.M. EST," *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/posts/112175731996> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸⁴⁷ "Tweet on July 22, 2009, 10:04 P.M. EST," *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/2790132626> (accessed December 8, 2022); "Facebook Post on July 22, 2009, 10:05 P.M. EST," *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/posts/118353656768> (accessed December 8, 2022); "President Obama's Primetime Press Conference on Health Reform | July 22, 2009 | Video."

⁸⁴⁸ Barack H. Obama, "The President's Weekly Address | July 25, 2009," *The American Presidency Project*, July 25, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-weekly-address-128> (accessed October 24, 2022).

⁸⁴⁹ "Weekly Address: Health Insurance Reform, Small Business and Your Questions," *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, July 24, 2009, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-obama-white-house/weekly-address-health-insurance-reform-small-business-and-your-questions/250980090192/> (accessed December 8, 2022).

reform” and the White House shared pictures of the president on the phone, supposedly with members of Congress.⁸⁵⁰ Such posts involved the people at home more in the process of getting the reform done than when just being presented with the result.

When the bill was passed on March 21, 2010, the president spoke about this historical achievement in the East Room of the White House late in the evening.⁸⁵¹ His remarks were also announced on the White House *Twitter* account and the press secretary tweeted shortly before Obama’s appearance:

President walking to East Room now for statement...what a night...what a journey.⁸⁵²

The White House would also live-tweet quotes from the president’s remarks and later uploaded a video of the remarks on the White House *YouTube* channel.⁸⁵³ Moreover, at half past midnight, they published a picture of the president, the vice president, and administration officials taken the moment the bill was passed on the White House *Facebook* page, where one can see them applauding and cheering.⁸⁵⁴ Furthermore, they celebrated their victory with the following post on *Facebook*:

The House voted last night to pass the most significant health reform legislation this country has seen in decades. And now, millions of Americans stand to benefit from lower health care costs, expanded coverage and tough consumer protections.⁸⁵⁵

On March 23, 2010, the day President Obama signed the Affordable Care Act, there was again much social media activity by the White House. They gave frequent updates on the

⁸⁵⁰ Josh Earnest, “Tweet on March 21, 2010, 10:14 P.M. EST,” *@PressSec44 Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/PressSec44/status/10850493515> (accessed December 12, 2022); “Tweet on March 21, 2010, 5:57 P.M. EST,” *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/10839958449> (accessed December 12, 2022).

⁸⁵¹ Barack H. Obama, “Remarks on House of Representatives Passage of Health Care Reform Legislation | March 21, 2010,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-house-representatives-passage-health-care-reform-legislation> (accessed December 12, 2022).

⁸⁵² “Tweet on March 21, 2010, 11:31 P.M. EST,” *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/10854189031> (accessed December 12, 2022); Josh Earnest, “Tweet on March 21, 2010, 11:45 P.M. EST,” *@PressSec44 Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/PressSec44/status/10854795116> (accessed December 12, 2022).

⁸⁵³ “Tweet on March 21, 2010, 11:48 P.M. EST,” *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/10854912736> (accessed December 12, 2022); “Tweet on March 21, 2010, 11:50 P.M. EST,” *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/10854983907> (accessed December 12, 2022); “Tweet on March 21, 2010, 11:53 P.M. EST,” *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/10855129305> (accessed December 12, 2022); Barack H. Obama, “President Obama on the Passage of Health Reform | March 21, 2010 | Video,” *The Obama White House YouTube Channel*, March 22, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GALYnnAQFKA> (accessed December 12, 2022).

⁸⁵⁴ “Facebook Post on March 22, 2010, 12:27 A.M. EST,” *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=376771319237&set=a.158628314237.115142.63811549237> (accessed December 12, 2022).

⁸⁵⁵ “Facebook Post on March 22, 2010, 9:59 A.M. EST,” *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/posts/pfbid02CsxgeSHvprtvkyihJmeboTGJYhNx55ZdyGCuFRagWPU84oiQC7W8xtkNCKhriDgl> (accessed December 12, 2022).

events on social media and encouraged people to watch events live. For that, the White House provided different options to do so through links in posts.⁸⁵⁶ After the bill had been signed into law, the White House tweeted:

Health insurance has now been reformed.⁸⁵⁷

A video on the remarks by the president and the signing of the bill was also uploaded to the *YouTube* channel.⁸⁵⁸ Later that the day, the White House also posted a picture on *Facebook* with the president's signature on the bill calling it the "Photo of the Day" and a link to so far unseen photographs on the process of getting health care reform passed.⁸⁵⁹ Overall, the White House kept the public informed and provided behind-the-scenes information about what had been happening. The intention was to give the public the feeling of being much more involved.

These two examples demonstrate the coordinated cross-channel use of social media by the Obama White House where several channels were used to promote or complement offline events like remarks or prime-time press conferences. Offline events on health care reform were intertwined with the White House online presence, giving the issue very consistent messaging and the public a holistic experience. It further allowed the public to be part of the events while they were happening without being on site.

The above analysis highlighted the defining parts in Obama's social media usage: sophisticated online and offline cross-channel communication with the aim to encourage participation by the public. Furthermore, the communication on events or policies was very straightforward. Individual posts and uploads on their own were informative but basic. It was the consistent use of available channels together with the offline events which made the communication comprehensive and overarching. Through simple communication it was easy for the public to follow the story, and through provided links the president's words could be accessed with little effort by users. Moreover, clever social media use

⁸⁵⁶ For example: "Tweet on March 23, 2010, 10:52 A.M. EST," *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/10928710048> (accessed December 12, 2022); "Facebook Post on March 23, 2010, 11:20 A.M. EST," *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/posts/101798456527553> (accessed December 12, 2022).

⁸⁵⁷ "Tweet on March 23, 2010, 11:58 A.M. EST," *@ObamaWhiteHouse Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/10931628143> (accessed December 12, 2022).

⁸⁵⁸ "President Obama Signs Health Reform into Law | March 23, 2010 | Video," *The Obama White House YouTube Channel*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIwM0gkLF0s> (accessed December 12, 2022).

⁸⁵⁹ "Facebook Post on March 23, 2010, 5:30 P.M. EST," *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/WhiteHouse/photos/a.158628314237.115142.63811549237/377332259237/?type=3> (accessed December 12, 2022); "Facebook Post on March 23, 2010, 4:19 P.M. EST," *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/posts/108956309130546> (accessed December 12, 2022).

allowed people who could not attend events to participate in them by sending question to the president online. In doing so, the White House could not only enter into direct interaction with the public but was also less dependent on the media as a message distributor.

The analysis also showed that the overall tone of the administration on their social media channels was polite and their posting mostly neutral or positive. The polite and matter-of-fact tone fitted into the general communication of the administration and corresponded to the behavior President Obama displayed. Also fitting to Obama's character, there were some humorous posts. Not connected to the ACA, but a funny joke on the expense of the president, was posted after the White House Correspondence Dinner in 2013. At the dinner, parts of the president's speech had been accompanied by funny pictures.⁸⁶⁰ The *Facebook* post quoted from the president's speech:

Second term, you need a burst of new energy, try some new things. And my team and I talked about it. We were willing to try anything. So we borrowed one of Michelle's tricks.⁸⁶¹

The post also showed a picture (*Figure 5*) that had been presented at the moment of the quote during the speech.



*Figure 5: Picture That Was Shown During Obama's Speech at the White House Correspondence Dinner*⁸⁶²

This not only caused laughter at the Correspondence Dinner but likely also among social media users.⁸⁶³

⁸⁶⁰ Barack H. Obama, "President Obama at White House Correspondents Dinner | April 27, 2013 | Video," *The Obama White House YouTube Channel*, April 28, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVtQ6i1jbsk> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸⁶¹ "Facebook Post on April 28, 2013, 7:19 P.M. EST," *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/WhiteHouse/photos/a.158628314237.115142.63811549237/10151616851754238/?type=3> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸⁶² *Ibid.* This is a screenshot of the picture from the *Facebook* post. Courtesy Barack Obama Presidential Library.

⁸⁶³ Barack H. Obama, "President Obama at White House Correspondents Dinner | April 27, 2013 | Video," 05:20–05:56.

Fitting to the generally friendly tone of the official White House accounts, they hardly posted anything negative about the media and rarely commented on their reporting through their social media accounts.⁸⁶⁴ There were some instances where they shared newspaper articles they liked, or which were positive of their administration. For example, in February 2010, Press Secretary Josh Earnest tweeted:

Please read this now – the price of doing nothing on health care – too many quotes to pull them all out – <http://nyti.ms/cKMymD>.⁸⁶⁵

This was then also retweeted by the White House account.⁸⁶⁶ Shortly before the enrollment period started in 2013, articles that explained the process and what options people had were shared on the White House *Twitter* account, for example:

.@NYTimes: Starting tomorrow, you can “compare health insurance plans & then buy...coverage on the spot.” nyti.ms/178MxtU #GetCovered.⁸⁶⁷

Even rarer was criticism of the media voiced through their accounts. Although not connected to the ACA, one tweet by Press Secretary Josh Earnest was noticeable due to its sharp tone:

Why didn't Forbes hire a fact checker for their cover ‘story’? Or did they simply not care about the facts? <http://bit.ly/aLRYkP>.⁸⁶⁸

⁸⁶⁴ Although, the communication on the social media channels from the Obama White House was polite, when scanning through the reactions to the White House’s social media posts, many are extremely negative or attacking and frequently factually wrong. For instance, under a tweet with a link to the video with the ten people who benefited from the ACA, someone tweeted: “@WhiteHouse Can we check him [Obama] into a psych ward? The deluded shouldn't run a temperature, let alone, the greatest nation on Earth!” Another Twitter user wrote: “@WhiteHouse wow a whole 10 people!!! Extremely mediocre.” However, one must keep in mind that this is not unusual on social media, and that typically the people who are discontent are more visible than people who are content or support the president’s policies. Moreover, the accumulation of negative reactions to posts is not restrained to accounts of politicians but holds true for social media accounts of companies and even individuals. Tweets can be found under: RichardP, “Tweet on February 05, 2015, 2:58 P.M. EST,” @RoxLo *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/RoxLo/status/563426567712681984> (accessed December 8, 2022); Flatbill Mennonite, “Tweet on February 05, 2015, 1:23 P.M. EST,” @WestTxRancher *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/WestTxRancher/status/563402448723644416> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸⁶⁵ Josh Earnest, “Tweet on February 28, 2010, 8:08 A.M. EST,” @PressSec44 *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/PressSec44/status/9775656548> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸⁶⁶ “Tweet on February 28, 2010, 2:22 P.M. EST,” @ObamaWhiteHouse *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/9788052136> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸⁶⁷ “Tweet on September 30, 2013, 2:27 P.M. EST,” @ObamaWhiteHouse *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/384746237561303040> (accessed December 8, 2022). A further example is: “‘Starting Oct. 1st, millions of Californians can start signing up for health insurance.’ – @LATimes: lat.ms/16ur0OR #GetCovered.” This tweet can be found under: “Tweet on September 30, 2013, 3:15 P.M. EST,” @ObamaWhiteHouse *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ObamaWhiteHouse/status/384758476850741248> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸⁶⁸ Josh Earnest, “Tweet on September 14, 2010, 6:30 P.M. EST,” @PressSec44 *Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/PressSec44/status/24514488468> (accessed December 8, 2022).

However, it was neither unfounded criticism nor was he alone in doing so. In his tweet, he linked an article by the *Columbia Journalism Review*, which harshly criticized the *Forbes* story as a smear piece.⁸⁶⁹

Overall, the Obama White House seldom attacked or commented on media reports with their social media channels. Their main aim was to circumvent the media through these channels and send their own messages to the public. Although they hardly angered the media with direct attack, the media would become frustrated with the circumvention. One instance, though not connected to the ACA, is worth noting in this context. On November 19, 2014, the White House posted a video on *Facebook* with Obama announcing a speech he would give the next day on steps to reform the immigration system.⁸⁷⁰ The media had not been informed of this announcement beforehand and was not amused. At a press briefing on the same day, while Josh Earnest talked about the posting, he was interrupted by angered *Fox News* correspondent Wendell Goler with the accusation that the White House was supporting *Facebook* with the post:

Q: Is that a thank-you to Zuckerberg?

MR. EARNEST: I'm sorry?

Q: Was that a thank-you to Zuckerberg, announcing it --

MR. EARNEST: No, I think this was an opportunity for us to reach hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people. In under an hour, the video reached more than 1.2 million users on Facebook; 227,000 people have viewed it and another 12,000 people have shared it. So this is a pretty effective way of the President communicating with the American public about his intention to try to take the steps that he believes are necessary to fix as much of the broken immigration system as is possible.⁸⁷¹

In the press secretary's answer to Mr. Goler's interjection, it becomes clear that the White House intentionally used social media in this case, going directly to the people and gain

⁸⁶⁹ Dinesh D'Souza, "How Obama Thinks," *Forbes*, September 9, 2010, <https://www.forbes.com/forbes/2010/0927/politics-socialism-capitalism-private-enterprises-obama-business-problem.html> (accessed October 25, 2022); Ryan Chittum, "Forbes' Shameful Piece on Obama as the 'Other'," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 13, 2010, https://archives.cjr.org/the_audit/forbes_shameful_obama_dinesh_dsouza.php?page=all&print=true (accessed October 25, 2022). There are further articles (from left and right) that strongly disagree with the *Forbes* article: Simon Maloy, "D'souza's the Roots of Obama's Rage Rooted in Lies," *Media Matters For America*, October 4, 2010, <https://www.mediamatters.org/dinesh-dsouza/dsouzas-roots-obamas-rage-rooted-lies> (accessed October 25, 2022); Daniel Larison, "Obama, Anticolonial Hegemonist?," *The American Conservative*, September 9, 2010, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/obama-anticolonial-hegemonist/> (accessed October 25, 2022).

⁸⁷⁰ "Facebook Post on November 19, 2014, 12:59 P.M. EST," *The Obama White House Facebook Page*, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10152967942944238> (accessed December 8, 2022).

⁸⁷¹ "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest | November 19, 2014," *The American Presidency Project*, November 19, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-285> (accessed October 25, 2022).

lots of online traction, which they achieved. In a later exchange during the briefing, the press secretary made the following statement:

Q: You said, announcing this on Facebook was effective because he reached 1.5 million people. You believe that --

MR. EARNEST: In the first hour. Pretty impressive, George, right?

Q: -- you reached more people than if you had announced it to the wires, the networks and the press corps?

MR. EARNEST: The good news is that the wires and the networks and the press corps are all on Facebook. And I noticed that even one of the networks, shortly after the video was posted to Facebook, actually broadcast it on their network. So the good news, George, is that we don't have to choose.⁸⁷²

Here, Earnest argued that through announcing it on *Facebook*, they got even more reach since the media would pick up on the post and transmit it to the public who had not seen it. This shows the understanding the Obama White House had on how to use social media channels to circumvent the media and get their message out while at the same time managing news reporting through attention-grabbing postings, though the latter was not their focus.

In general, the Obama White House did not abandon the “old” communication channels as television networks, newspapers, or the White House press corps. Yet particularly the latter was affected by fewer opportunities to speak to the president. If reporters had the chance to interact with the President, as during press conferences Obama proved to be a master at sticking to his message. With his typically long answers, he would limit the number of questions that could be asked, again reducing his exposure to the press corps.

Social media were a very significant part of their communications strategy. The new technology not only allowed the Obama White House to circumvent the media to a large degree but also provided them with unprecedented opportunities in reaching the public with the exact message they wanted to. And they did so masterfully, using each medium according to its capabilities. The Obama White House would mostly use informative and friendly worded posts, and skillfully employed emotional content and the option of videos for their communication. In addition, the possibilities for users to not only receive content through the medium but also be able to actively participate in an exchange with the White House (e.g., online or even in combination with offline events) as well as share information

⁸⁷² Ibid.

through social media with friends was the basis for the viral distribution of content provided by the Obama White House. Consequently, the number of Americans the White House reached through social media increased exponentially while at the same time having a higher level of intimacy during the exchange. Combining these aspects, the Obama White House had the chance to reach millions of Americans in less time and with a much more personal feeling to it.

This also meant that interacting with the media was less crucial for Obama as social media are fully detached from established news media companies. This decreased the necessity for sharing information with reporters and resulted in reduced accessibility, which partially explains the tense media relations of the White House and in particular of President Obama.

The other major reason for the tense relationship was the generally low transparency and restrictive handling of information. The Obama administration made extensive use of FOIA to control the release of information. Many of the denied FOIA requests were later proven to be against the law, which makes it seem like the Obama administration was determined to reduce the information flow by exploiting a law originally intended to increase governmental transparency. Furthermore, Obama had leakers aggressively prosecuted and even invoked legal action against the press involved. This left leakers and journalists in fear, giving the latter the feeling of being restricted in doing their work.

The Obama White House was characterized by a sophisticated communications management. Combined with Obama's frequent appearances on comedic or late-night talk shows, in which he came across as a very humorous, thoughtful, and charismatic president, the impression might arise that there was a harmonious relationship between Obama and the media. However, analysis has shown that this was not the case.

One significant impact of Obama's presidency was the effect it had on future White House communication. By successfully using new technologies available, they not only changed the way presidential candidates have run their campaigns, but also significantly altered the understanding of how to communicate with the public when in office.

VII. Donald J. Trump

1. Donald J. Trump and the Media

Donald John Trump was born in New York City on June 14, 1946, and was one of the five children of Fred and Maryanne Trump. Early on, he tested his boundaries. As Trump's rebellious behavior did not disappear in his teenage years, his father Fred sent him to the New York Military Academy.⁸⁷³ After military school, Trump went on to study at Fordham University and later transferred to the University of Pennsylvania to study at the prestigious Wharton School of Finance. After his graduation from the University of Pennsylvania, he joined his father's business full-time and became company president in 1971.⁸⁷⁴ Over the following decades, Trump worked as a real estate developer and was frequently featured in the tabloid media.⁸⁷⁵

Since 2004, the reality series *The Apprentice* greatly increased Trump's exposure to the American public. Around the same time, Trump changed his business model from developing real-estate to licensing the brand Trump. Soon his name appeared on new buildings around the world, and on many other – more or less successful – products. The show and new business model made him and his brand very popular. Since 2005, Donald Trump has been married to Slovenian model Melania Trump. The couple has a son. Trump was married twice before and has four more children from these two marriages.⁸⁷⁶

Over the years, Trump had voiced and acted on his political views at different occasions. Between October 1999 and February 2000, he had even tried to get the presidential nomination of the Reform Party but then withdrew from the race. In 2011, while again publicly musing on whether to run for president, he became strongly involved in the so-called birther movement. He alleged that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States – thus not eligible to hold the highest office of the country – and demanded that Obama publish the long form of his birth certificate. Even after Obama had done so, Trump for some time continued to question its authenticity.⁸⁷⁷ This also shows that Trump would not adhere to facts if they did not suit him, which would become particularly problematic during his presidency.

⁸⁷³ Moore, *The American President*, 674.

⁸⁷⁴ Martin Thunert, "Donald J. Trump: Die Beispiellose Präsidentschaft," in *Die Präsidenten der USA: Historische Porträts von George Washington bis Joe Biden*, ed. Christof Mauch, 498–521 (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2021), 499. Donald Trump was exempted from military service due to a medical draft deferment, later explained by bone spurs.

⁸⁷⁵ Moore, *The American President*, 675–78.

⁸⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 676–78.

⁸⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 677, 679.

In June 2015, Trump officially announced he would run for president. At the beginning, Trump's candidacy was not taken seriously by politicians and the media. But with 16 other Republican candidates in the primary contest, Trump with his pompous style and outlandish remarks, stood out. In the end he won the nomination. Although his style had deterred many voters, many others perceived him as “refreshingly honest.”⁸⁷⁸

In contrast to Trump, his Democratic opponent in the general election, Hillary Clinton, had extensive experience in government and politics. His chances of becoming president were again seen as very slim by many, though – as during the Republican primary – Trump proved to be a candidate many Americans might vote for.⁸⁷⁹ Trump benefited from the “free” media coverage he and his campaign got during the election. With his outlandish remarks, for instance, about Mexican immigrants “bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people,” he generated extreme reactions and received lots of attention.⁸⁸⁰ His rallies were covered by the media and by that he already dominated the news coverage during his campaign. According to Helfert, “he offered few or no specifics on his ambitious goals for the country [which] did not measurably deter the public's interest – or his ability to command near saturation broadcast coverage.”⁸⁸¹ Journalist Matt Bai already wrote in December 2015, “we need him for the narrative power, for the clicks and debate ratings and sheer fascination factor. He needs us for the free publicity and the easy, evocative foil.”⁸⁸² Eventually, 306 electoral votes went to Donald Trump, thus considerably more than to Hillary Clinton, even though he lost the popular vote by about 2.8 million votes. On January 20, 2017, Trump was inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States without having previous experience in elected office or military service.⁸⁸³

He became the first president in U.S. history who was impeached twice. As president, he had “solicited the interference of a foreign government, Ukraine, in the 2020 United States Presidential election,” and on December 18, 2019, was thus impeached by the House based

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid., 679–80.

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid., 680–81.

⁸⁸⁰ Donald J. Trump, “Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President in New York City | June 16, 2015,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-announcing-candidacy-for-president-new-york-city> (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁸⁸¹ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 230–31.

⁸⁸² Matt Bai, “Trump and the Media, Made for Each Other,” *Yahoo News*, December 24, 2015, https://www.yahoo.com/news/trump-and-the-media-made-1327700756660278.html?guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xiLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAABG626jnilugPLE00mVuLZTW3xIBiCG1-mhsuPyYsUEe5TWxmV-mV2NHHZlcOew7OxW8ZCYJmCFHIU1AnaS8jVFRn_c8c1h2OMMRv9fob6Gq2jcqI1TW56O1Ti5jpJyE6I-aHdMqxuhdWWrtDhw4gx4TGntiySgum5TvkglXT4y&guccounter=2 (accessed October 22, 2021).

⁸⁸³ Moore, *The American President*, 673, 681.

on two articles: abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.⁸⁸⁴ He was impeached a second time on January 13, 2021, as he had “engaged in high Crimes and Misdemeanors by inciting violence against the Government of the United States.”⁸⁸⁵ Trump had not acknowledged his defeat in the 2020 presidential election and had made unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud. Fueled by the president's claims and statements, Trump supporters had marched to the U.S. Capitol and had forcibly entered it in order to disrupt the election certification process on January 6, 2021. Trump was acquitted by the Republican controlled Senate in both impeachment trials.⁸⁸⁶

Trump also faced an unexpected challenge during his last year of the presidency, namely the COVID-19 pandemic (see VII.4). Studies show that Trump’s approach towards addressing the pandemic had a critical impact on the result of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election.⁸⁸⁷ His presidency ended on January 20, 2021.⁸⁸⁸

Throughout his presidency, the overall focus of Trump was not “on detailing to the public an articulated agenda,” but rather “on the presentation of his presidency and leadership.” To Trump this made the most sense as showmanship was crucial in his former life as entrepreneur and media personality.⁸⁸⁹

Moreover, Trump’s media strategy appeared to be based on “picking a fight rather than a flight.”⁸⁹⁰ This seems to be Trump’s general attitude towards life, if one, for example, recalls comments as: “Over the course of your life, you will find that things are not always fair. [...] But you have to put your head down and fight, fight, fight. Never, ever, ever give

⁸⁸⁴ “Articles of Impeachment Against Donald John Trump | House Resolution 755,” *United States Congress*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hres755/BILLS-116hres755enr.pdf> (accessed February 3, 2023).

⁸⁸⁵ “H. RES. 24,” *United States Congress*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/hres24/BILLS-117hres24rds.pdf> (accessed February 3, 2023), 2.

⁸⁸⁶ Benjamin C. Waterhouse, “Donald Trump: Life in Brief,” *Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/president/trump/life-in-brief> (accessed February 3, 2023).

⁸⁸⁷ “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html> (accessed February 1, 2022). For studies on the impact of President Trump’s handling of the pandemic on his failed reelection campaign refer to Leonardo Baccini, Abel Brodeur and Stephen Weymouth, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election,” *IZA DP*, no. 13862 (November 2020), <https://docs.iza.org/dp13862.pdf> (accessed January 24, 2023); Harold Clarke, Marianne C. Stewart and Karl Ho, “Did Covid-19 Kill Trump Politically? The Pandemic and Voting in the 2020 Presidential Election,” *Social Science Quarterly*, 102, no. 5 (2021), 2194–209.

⁸⁸⁸ Benjamin C. Waterhouse, “Donald Trump,” *Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/president/trump> (accessed February 4, 2023).

⁸⁸⁹ Martha Joynt Kumar, “Contemporary Presidency - Presidents Meet Reporters: Is Donald Trump an Outlier Among Recent Presidents?,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 50, no. 1 (2020), 193–215: 211–2. Kumar looks at the first 32 months of the Trump presidency.

⁸⁹⁰ Frantzych, *Presidents and the Media*, 142; Michael Scherer and Zeke J. Miller, “Donald Trump After Hours,” *Time*, <https://time.com/donald-trump-after-hours/> (accessed October 26, 2021).

up.”⁸⁹¹ This attitude was also visible from the beginning of his presidency. Trump’s relationship with the media did not start with the typical honeymoon phase, where the first months are characterized by less critical media coverage. Instead it “looked more like it was on the path to a divorce,” as Frantzich described it.⁸⁹²

The hostility in the relationship came to a large part from the Trump administration and not the media. A study by Joshua Meyer-Gutbrod and John T. Woolley of press briefings found that in contrast to their predecessors, the Trump administration had “a more aggressive and negative stance toward the press.” In addition, the study found few signs “to support the claim that the media has been consistently more negative with the Trump Administration.”⁸⁹³

However, one should not mistake President Trump’s attacks on the media as simple hatred. It was also a deliberate strategy. As Chris Cillizza rightly observed, “there isn’t a more attentive media consumer than Donald Trump. He watches cable TV constantly [...]. He loves this stuff,” which is also quite evident in the many television sets that were installed at the White House. Moreover, when contacting media members, he can be – as Cillizza described his encounter – “tremendously solicitous.”⁸⁹⁴ This is further supported by a statement, Donald Trump made to Lesley Stahl, renowned journalist, former White House correspondents, and news magazine *60 Minutes* correspondent. Stahl was the first to interview Donald Trump after being elected president. When asked about it, she stated that before the actual interview for *60 Minutes* began, when no cameras were rolling, she had asked Trump why he kept attacking the press. According to Stahl, President Trump answered: “You know why I do it? I do it to discredit you all and demean you all, so when you write negative stories about me, no one will believe you.”⁸⁹⁵ Cillizza further argued

⁸⁹¹ Donald J. Trump, “Commencement Address at the United States Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut | May 17, 2017,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/commencement-address-the-united-states-coast-guard-academy-new-london-connecticut-4> (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁸⁹² Frantzich, *Presidents and the Media*, 35.

⁸⁹³ Joshua Meyer-Gutbrod and John T. Woolley, “New Conflicts in the Briefing Room: Using Sentiment Analysis to Evaluate Administration-Press Relations from Clinton Through Trump,” *Political Communication*, 38, no. 3 (2021), 241–59: 250–251, 253–254. The study looked at press briefings of the first two years of the administrations of Clinton, Bush (43), Obama, and Trump. Further studies are needed to support these findings but also to transfer them to other interactions of the Trump administration with the media. Yet, the study is a first indication that the perceived increased hostility by the Trump administration is also measurable.

⁸⁹⁴ Chris Cillizza, “Why Pro Wrestling Is the Perfect Metaphor for Donald Trump's Presidency,” July 2, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/02/politics/trump-wrestling-tweet/index.html> (accessed October 29, 2021).

⁸⁹⁵ “Deadline Club Awards 2018 Dinner Conversation with Judy Woodruff and Lesley Stahl | May 21, 2018 | Video,” *Deadline Club YouTube Channel*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nq6Tt--uAfs> (accessed December 14, 2022), 21:22–22:11.

that most media members knew that Trump was doing this for political gain. Unaware of this are his supporters, who genuinely “believe that he hates the media. That he is the fighter against ‘fake news’ they have been waiting for their entire lives.”⁸⁹⁶

Moreover, what becomes clear is that Trump was “the decision maker and staff having little role to play.”⁸⁹⁷ This also translated to his communication style. According to former Press Secretary of the Trump administration Sean Spicer, Trump “would rather say exactly what he has to say [...] than have someone else say it.” Instead of having a coordinated communications team, Trump preferred a “one-man-at-the-top system.” This kept him very flexible in reacting to events, but it hindered coordination of staff and continuity of communication messages. Speaking for himself “proved to be a defining element in the Trump publicity operation.”⁸⁹⁸ This also represents a major difference between Trump and other recent presidents. Although similar organizational structures existed in the Trump administration, staff of these structures did not coordinate or organize long-term together. Trump simply did not think of teams as important: “I don’t have teams. Everyone is talking about teams. I’m the team.”⁸⁹⁹

This attitude was also reflected in the communications offices. Trump’s own perception “as the sole official communicator,” led to a smaller number of communications staff and “the operation having little organizational coherence” in comparison with recent administrations. According to Kumar’s count, there were less than 36 staff members working in the field of publicity at the Trump White House. President Obama had about double the number, and President George W. Bush and President Clinton also had a larger communications staff.⁹⁰⁰ Moreover, Trump had a lot of staff, which had no prior experience in the executive branch. As a result, it was harder for the Trump administration “to deal with the frustrations of divided power.”⁹⁰¹

Trump as the main communicator and the limited exchange among communications offices led to staff not knowing about the latest developments, unknowingly contradicting

⁸⁹⁶ Chris Cillizza, “Why Pro Wrestling is the Perfect Metaphor for Donald Trump's Presidency.”

⁸⁹⁷ Kumar, “Contemporary Presidency - Presidents Meet Reporters: Is Donald Trump an Outlier among Recent Presidents?”: 206.

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid., 206–7. Sean Spicer in an interview with Kumar by phone.

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid., 194; “Remarks by President Trump Before Marine One Departure | October 25, 2019,” *The Trump White House*, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-marine-one-departure-72/> (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁹⁰⁰ Kumar, “Contemporary Presidency - Presidents Meet Reporters: Is Donald Trump an Outlier among Recent Presidents?”: 207–8; Kumar, *Managing the President's Message*, 88, 320. Numbers of staff might vary slightly across each presidents’ time in office, yet the difference between Trump and his recent predecessors is evident.

⁹⁰¹ Kumar, “Contemporary Presidency - Presidents Meet Reporters: Is Donald Trump an Outlier among Recent Presidents?”: 194.

the president or the president contradicting them. For instance, at 10:55 a.m. on September 10, 2019, the White House announced a briefing for 1:30 p.m. with Secretary of the Treasury Steve Mnuchin, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and National Security Advisor John Bolton. Yet only Pompeo and Mnuchin appeared at the briefing. Bolton had been released from his duties by Trump the evening before. The Press Office had, however, not been aware of this development.⁹⁰² Staff turnover in general was very high at the Trump White House compared to other recent administrations, which hindered coordination and cooperation.⁹⁰³

Trump's general media strategy centered around attacks and aggressive language, not only towards media but also against opponents and people who disagreed with him. This was already visible during the campaign and stayed this way during his presidency. These attacks "generated a very large amount of news attention," with which he managed to dominate the news.⁹⁰⁴ Trump and the White House used different labels for the media, depending on the situation and what they were trying to achieve. In the later analysis, it becomes obvious that these were frequently combined. The following gives a short overview about the most important ones.

Alternative Facts

Just one day after Trump's inauguration, Sean Spicer, stated in a press briefing that "this was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration – period."⁹⁰⁵ Spicer referred to media reports on the size of Trump's inauguration crowd that stated fewer attendants at Trump's inauguration than during Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009. The news agency *Reuters*, for instance, noted that "aerial photographs showed that the crowds for Trump's inauguration were smaller than in 2009."⁹⁰⁶ According to Frantzich, this turned into "a spitting contest over whose facts were real." Responding to a question by Chuck Todd, host of *NBC's Meet the Press*, on why Spicer had made false claims about the crowd size, Kellyanne Conway argued that Spicer "gave alternative facts." With that the Counselor to President Trump "threw gasoline on the fire" and further eroded the administration's

⁹⁰² Ibid., 208–9.

⁹⁰³ Ibid., 207.

⁹⁰⁴ Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication and Character*, 169.

⁹⁰⁵ "Remarks to the Press by Press Secretary Sean Spicer | January 21, 2017," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-press-press-secretary-sean-spicer> (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁹⁰⁶ Jeff Mason and Roberta Rampton, "White House Accuses Media of Playing down Inauguration Crowds," *Reuters*, January 22, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-media/white-house-accuses-mediaof-playing-down-inauguration-crowds-idUSKBN15600I> (accessed November 2, 2021).

credibility with considerable parts of the media.⁹⁰⁷ Carter Eskew pointed out that the Trump administration had a “strategy of devaluing objective fact[s]” as they had their “alternatives.” This loose attitude towards the truth came up frequently and in various forms during the Trump administration, not only showing their stance on facts but also the administration’s deceitfulness.⁹⁰⁸ According to *The Washington Post*’s count, the number of false or misleading claims Trump made during his four-year presidency added up to 30,573, which is an extraordinarily high number.⁹⁰⁹

Asked in an interview five days later about the reasons to keep on arguing with the media and trying to win the discussion about the inaugural crowd size, Trump answered: “Because I’m representing a lot of people, the forgotten people [...], and they have been forgotten by the media that tries to distort them out of life. [...] I want the forgotten people to understand that we are not forgotten anymore.”⁹¹⁰ Here, Trump implies that the media intentionally erased the people who were his supporters and that they had been “forgotten” by former presidents, and he would now fight for them to be seen. This is an interesting narrative, having a similar ring as Nixon’s silent majority. The issues here were not whether Trump actually wanted and did fight for this specific group he defined, but rather that his voters thought he did.

The Enemy of the People

The same day Sean Spicer fought with the media over the size of the inauguration crowd, Trump said in a speech that he had “a running war with the media,” who he described as “among the most dishonest human beings on Earth [sic!].”⁹¹¹ And within Trump’s first week in office, in a *New York Times* interview White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon,

⁹⁰⁷ Frantziach, *Presidents and the Media*, 35; “Conway: Press Secretary Gave ‘Alternative Facts’ | January 22, 2017 | Video,” *NBC News*, <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/conway-press-secretary-gave-alternative-facts-860142147643> (accessed December 14, 2022), 02:01-02:03.

⁹⁰⁸ Carter Eskew, “Trump Is Nixon Without the Polish,” *The Washington Post*, January 24, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2017/01/24/trump-is-nixon-without-the-polish/> (accessed April 28, 2020).

⁹⁰⁹ Glenn Kessler et al., “In Four Years, President Trump Made 30,573 False or Misleading Claims: The Fact Checker’s Database of the False or Misleading Claims Made by President Trump While in Office.,” *The Washington Post*, January 20, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/?itid=lk_inline_manual_11 (accessed March 6, 2023).

⁹¹⁰ “Interview: David Brody of CBN Interviews Donald Trump - January 26, 2017,” *Factba.se*, <https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-interview-cbn-washington-dc-january-26-2017> (accessed April 17, 2020).

⁹¹¹ Donald J. Trump, “Remarks at the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, Virginia | January 21, 2017,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-central-intelligence-agency-langley-virginia-2> (accessed December 14, 2022).

called the media the “opposition party.”⁹¹² When asked by David Brody the following day whether he agreed with Steve Bannon, Trump responded that “the media is the opposition party in many ways.”⁹¹³ About a month later the president even called the media “the enemy of the American People” in a tweet, and he continued to use this label frequently.⁹¹⁴ For the phrase “enemy of the people” in connection to the media, the *Trump Twitter Archive* alone shows 48 tweets by Trump during his presidency.⁹¹⁵

Fake News

Another label aimed at the media was “fake news.” In an interview Trump stated that

much of the media makes up stories. [...] But much of the media is distorted and fake. [...] I read stories that they write that are knowingly false. [...] They know it's a lie and they write them anyway [...]. We want truthful media, we don't have truthful media, [...] I actually think they are sick people.⁹¹⁶

When simply reading Trump’s statement, it seems that he talked about what was long meant by “fake news.” Yet, according to *The Washington Post* reporter Callum Borchers, “fake news” changed its meaning. After Trump and some conservatives adopted the two words, they redefined the term’s meaning from “made-up stories” to “any reporting they don't like,” which then was declared false.⁹¹⁷ Over his four years in office, Trump used “fake news” over 2,170 times in public remarks like interviews or on *Twitter*.⁹¹⁸ For instance, on March 11, 2018, Trump claimed that his “approval ratings [were] at around 50%, which is higher than Obama.” Reports that disputed this were “fake news.”⁹¹⁹ However, the actual approval rating of Trump in the *Rasmussen* poll he referred to was 44 percent.⁹²⁰ The percentage ties with that of President Barack Obama in a *Rasmussen* poll

⁹¹² Michael M. Grynbaum, “Top Strategist Casts Media as ‘Opposition Party’,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2017, A1.

⁹¹³ “Interview: David Brody of CBN Interviews Donald Trump - January 26, 2017.”

⁹¹⁴ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on February 17, 2017, 4:48 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁹¹⁵ *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 14, 2022). A search for the phrase “Enemy of the People” was done. Retweets and deleted tweets were excluded.

⁹¹⁶ “Interview: David Brody of CBN Interviews Donald Trump - January 26, 2017.”

⁹¹⁷ Callum Borchers, “‘Fake News’ Has Now Lost All Meaning,” *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/09/fake-news-has-now-lost-all-meaning/> (accessed April 28, 2020).

⁹¹⁸ *Factba.se*, <https://factba.se/trump/search#Fake%2BNews> (accessed December 14, 2022). A search for the key word “fake news” was done.

⁹¹⁹ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on March 11, 2018, 11:16 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁹²⁰ “Trump Approval Index History,” *Rasmussen Reports*, https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/trump_administration/trump_approval_index_history (accessed November 2, 2021).

taken at the same time in the presidency.⁹²¹ Therefore, they were not lower than Trump's. Moreover, Trump claimed reports on his approval ratings were “fake news” even though his own tweet was completely inaccurate. Consequently, “fake news” and “alternative facts” intended to nullify reporting that did not represent the Trump administration's view. This is particularly troublesome as it devalues the correct reporting of the media, and Trump actively fueled “red-hot antipathy to the mainstream media for his own ends” among his voter base.⁹²² Such attacks had effects that outlasted his presidency (see III.3.2).

Liberal Media

Trump also frequently expressed general mistrust towards the media.⁹²³ In February 2017, Trump said at a press conference that the media had been “so biased, and really [...] a disgrace.”⁹²⁴ Furthermore, he accused the media of “highly slanted & even fraudulent reporting” via *Twitter* in July 2017.⁹²⁵ This was also pointed out by White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who accused the media of “purposefully putting out information [...] know[n] to be false.”⁹²⁶ Trump argued in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* that “the liberal media dislikes” him and further reasoned that they constantly criticized or reported falsely on him because he proved the media wrong: “I was successful at everything I ever did and then I run for president, first time [...] I ran for president first time and lo and behold, I win. [...] I'm smarter than all of them put together, but they can't admit it.”⁹²⁷ With this train of thought, Trump simply declared all criticism by the media as envious and vindictive reporting.

⁹²¹ “Obama Approval Index History,” *Rasmussen Reports*, https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/obama_administration/obama_approval_index_history (accessed November 2, 2021).

⁹²² Randall J. Stephens, “Richard Nixon's Authoritarian Loathing of the Media Lives on in Donald Trump.”

⁹²³ Hamilton, “Attacks on the Press Have Helped Bring Down a President Before.”

⁹²⁴ “Remarks at an African American History Month Listening Session | February 01, 2017,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-african-american-history-month-listening-session> (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁹²⁵ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on July 16, 2017, 7:15 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁹²⁶ “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Sarah Sanders | December 11, 2017,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/press-briefing-press-secretary-sarah-sanders-35> (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁹²⁷ “Transcript of Donald Trump Interview with the Wall Street Journal,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/transcript-of-donald-trump-interview-with-the-wall-street-journal-1515715481> (accessed February 18, 2020).

Friendly Media

Yet, there were not only opponents in the media landscape, but media outlets or personnel Trump liked and preferred to interact with. “Friendly” media for President Trump could easily be identified as Trump publicly stated his opinion on reporters and news outlets. For instance, Trump thanked the news show *Fox & Friends* for – what he considered – “exposing the truth” in a tweet on February 5, 2018.⁹²⁸ And the president’s perspective on the media influenced their access to him. Brian Stelter argued that “no other media outlet even comes close to *Fox’s* level of access.” Trump gave close to 20 interviews on *Fox Network* shows in his first nine months in office, whereas *The New York Times*, in second place on the list, only got four interviews.⁹²⁹ According to Jason Schwartz, such favorable treatment was “unprecedented in the history of presidential TV interviews.” He furthermore noted that Trump’s preference for *Fox* stemmed from the fact that *Fox* ran many shows that reported predominantly positively about Trump and his administration. For instance, Sean Hannity, a commentator and host of the *Sean Hannity Show* on *Fox News*, publicly supported Trump.⁹³⁰ However, even such close ties can loosen as will be shown later.

From this overview it also becomes clear that when Trump referred to the media in a negative way, he meant the parts of the media he did not like because of their critical reporting. They would also frequently get further nicknames as “lamestream media.” Yet, it not only stayed with nicknames. Donald Trump’s history of accusing the media as unfair towards him or as the enemy also “morphed into vague threats of government action at his perceived adversaries.”⁹³¹ An example is Trump’s reaction to an *NBC* report that was based on anonymous sources and stated that Trump “wanted what amounted to a nearly tenfold increase in the U.S. nuclear arsenal.” The report also claimed that due to Trump’s remarks, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had called him a “moron.”⁹³² In a response to the

⁹²⁸ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on February 05, 2018, 7:17 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁹²⁹ Brian Stelter, “Trump Has Granted Fox News 19 Interviews Since Inauguration,” *CNN*, October 25, 2017, <https://money.cnn.com/2017/10/25/media/fox-news-president-trump-interviews/index.html> (accessed November 3, 2021).

⁹³⁰ Jason Schwartz, “Trump Gives 18th Interview to Fox,” *Politico*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/25/how-many-interviews-has-trump-given-fox-244157> (accessed November 3, 2021).

⁹³¹ David Nakamura, “Trump Amps up Threats on Press,” *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2017, A1.

⁹³² Courtney Kube et al., “Trump Wanted Dramatic Increase in Nuclear Arsenal in Military Meeting,” *NBC News*, October 11, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/all/trump-wanted-dramatic-increase-nuclear-arsenal-meeting-military-leaders-n809701> (accessed November 2, 2021).

report on *Twitter* Trump implied that there might be a point where it would be “appropriate to challenge their [networks] License[sic!].” Later that day his threat was more explicit: “licenses must be challenged and, if appropriate, revoked.”⁹³³ Legal scholars argued that it was an empty threat by Trump as “the FCC does not grant licenses to networks,” only to individual stations.⁹³⁴ Even Jessica Rosenworcel, an FCC official, tweeted that this is “not how it works” and enclosed an explanatory report on regulations and licenses by the FCC.⁹³⁵

Furthermore, Trump did not hesitate to attack specific journalists publicly. On *Twitter* he called Michael Wolff “a total loser.”⁹³⁶ Moreover, angered by the publication of Wolff’s controversial book *Fire and Fury*, Trump stated during a cabinet meeting in January 2018 that “we are going to take a strong look at our country’s libel laws” since they “are a sham and a disgrace.” These statements were directed at everyone who “says something that is false and defamatory about someone.”⁹³⁷ And in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Trump stated that “I think that when somebody makes false statements and libelous statements [...]. When they have phony sources, when the sources don’t exist, [...] I think they should have a liability.”⁹³⁸ Trump’s comments were perceived as threats by journalists and networks as it appeared that Trump wanted “to make it easier to sue” journalists, networks, and others who did not report positively about him, even though it would have been difficult to implement legally.⁹³⁹

As the Trump White House singled out certain media as favorites and others as foes based on their reporting, they further increased the political divide of the country.⁹⁴⁰ Farnsworth points out that “dishonesty may matter less than used to be the case.” He explains that – as

⁹³³ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on October 11, 2017, 9:55 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 14, 2022); Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on October 11, 2017, 8:09 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁹³⁴ Nakamura, “Trump Amps up Threats on Press.”

⁹³⁵ Jessica Rosenworcel, “Tweet on October 11, 2017, 10:33 A.M. EST,” *@JRosenworcel Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/jrosenworcel/status/918122410620194816?lang=de> (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁹³⁶ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on January 05, 2018, 11:32 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 14, 2022). Michael Wolff claimed to give insight in the Trump White House, though the accuracy of his statements in the book is disputed.

⁹³⁷ Donald J. Trump, “Remarks During a Cabinet Meeting | January 10, 2018,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-during-cabinet-meeting-0> (accessed December 14, 2022).

⁹³⁸ “Transcript of Donald Trump Interview With The Wall Street Journal.”

⁹³⁹ Josh Bell, “Trump Once Again Threatens to Change Federal Libel Laws That Don’t Exist,” *American Civil Liberties Union*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/free-speech/freedom-press/trump-once-again-threatens-change-federal-libel-laws-dont-exist> (accessed April 20, 2020). Josh Bell, a media strategist at the American Civil Liberties Union, argues that it would be hard to change the libel law. On the one hand, because of the First Amendment protection of the freedom of the press. On the other hand, “libel cases are based on state laws,” therefore the president and Congress have no power to change them.

⁹⁴⁰ Meyer-Gutbrod and Woolley, “New Conflicts in the Briefing Room”: 242.

not every media outlet pointed out untruths and lies by the president and the administration officials (they rather spread them) – Trump did not need to admit his lies. He could “simply dismiss any unappealing media reports as ‘fake news.’” This also applied to other administration officials who could “deny the obvious contradictions and reversals as figments of biased reporter imaginations.”⁹⁴¹ Thus, the partisan polarization of the media environment Trump operated in, played to his advantage. Moreover, as parts of the public already doubted the objectivity of the media since Nixon, Trump was able to exploit this mistrust (see III.2 and III.3). The president’s “fake news” claims did surely not convince his opposition, but it gave his supporters an easy – yet not factual – explanation for the many critical media accounts.

Consequently, the media faced a particular problem when covering Donald Trump. Every criticism or fact-checking was seen as non-objective reporting by his supporters, and the president kept constantly fueling this sentiment with his comments. Journalists grappled whether they should simply report what the president had said, even if it was not true. Or should they rather challenge the president’s statements even though this might be considered by some as inappropriate for unbiased reporting? The media was confronted with questions about “what their professional integrity required in reporting on Donald Trump.” Until the end of Trump’s presidency, the media were not able “to reclaim their role as the unbiased source of information” with a large part of the public.⁹⁴²

The president’s difficult relationship with the media was also visible during his press conferences, which were not the president’s favorite format. He frequently clashed with journalists during them.

2. Donald J. Trump and Press Conferences

President Trump neither liked most of the media outlets present at press conferences, nor did he like being asked critical questions. Until the end of 2019, he held an average of 1.44 press conferences per month, which is significantly lower than President Obama’s average of 1.83 of his first three years in office. Trump’s low interest in press conferences becomes even clearer when looking at the ratio between joint and solo press conferences. Over the first three years, he held 43 joint press conferences, but only 9 solo press conferences. In

⁹⁴¹ Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication and Character*, 170.

⁹⁴² Louis S. Maisel and Hannah E. Dineen, eds., *Trumping Ethical Norms: Teachers, Preachers, Pollsters, and the Media Respond to Donald Trump* (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 17–19.

comparison, President Obama held 25 solo and 37 joint press conferences in his first three years in office.⁹⁴³

Instead of press conferences, Trump seemed to prefer other venues, as for instance, television interviews. As they did for other presidents, they allowed the president to reach many of his supporters. For instance, he called in to or appeared on *Fox News* shows, in particular on *Fox & Friends* and the shows of Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, and Jeanine Pirro. However, he also gave interviews to local media to reach specific audiences. Yet, Trump did not only focus on television but also gave print interviews. Although television is important to presidents, print media are still relevant as they are an important information source for television presenters and reporters and thus print media help to get the message to constituents.⁹⁴⁴

The preparation time for Trump's interviews varied. Sometimes there was little preparation, in particular when Trump phoned in to news shows spontaneously. However, when he gave interviews at rallies to local media, more preparation was involved as he wanted to have facts and figures on the local area, for example the economy or the candidate he was campaigning for. According to a background interview conducted by Kumar with a White House official, the briefings typically happened on Air Force One and then a quick refreshing of the president's knowledge was done shortly before he was interviewed. Generally, one information that Trump wanted before he took questions by the media were the current headlines or main topics on the news and social media. Trump wanted to be informed about what the media representatives he was going to meet were concerned with.⁹⁴⁵ After 32 months in office, Trump had given the second largest number of interviews compared with his five direct predecessors. Only Obama had given more.⁹⁴⁶ Trump also particularly liked the informal and more spontaneous question-and-answer sessions. Those sessions are typically held somewhere on the White House grounds and used to supplement the more formal forums such as the press conferences. During the Trump administration, the question-and-answer session took on a major or even substitute role. After about 2.5 years into his presidency, Donald Trump had the most question-and-answer sessions in comparison with his five predecessors, with most of them lagging far

⁹⁴³ Gerhard Peters, "Presidential News Conferences."

⁹⁴⁴ Kumar, "Contemporary Presidency - Presidents Meet Reporters: Is Donald Trump an Outlier among Recent Presidents?": 201–2.

⁹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 203 Information based on statements by former Deputy Press Secretary Judd Deere given in an interview with Kumar.

⁹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

behind.⁹⁴⁷ This is also reflected in the number of exchanges with reporters, which include the Q&A sessions, where Trump had 506 during his first three years in office compared to Obama who only had 96.⁹⁴⁸

Whereas his predecessors would talk about ongoing events and the current state of plans or actions taken, Trump would use his sessions to talk about nearly everything, from current political events to attacking opponents or the media. Yet, he answered significantly more questions from reporters than his predecessors during these sessions. Compared to press conferences, the exchanges had the advantage that Trump in general had more control, he basically “served as the ringmaster.” He could set the timing and pick the questions he preferred or wanted to answer from the ones shouted at him. Generally, the sessions would take place in smaller spaces as the Oval Office, but Trump preferred to answer questions on his way to or from Marine One – the presidential helicopter – on the South Lawn.⁹⁴⁹ These so called “chopper talks,” coming from the colloquial word “chopper” for helicopter, became a trademark of the Trump’s presidency with the president taking questions from the media on his terms. Often the running rotor blades would make it necessary for reporters and Trump to shout.⁹⁵⁰

Former Deputy Press Secretary Judd Deere argued in an interview with Kumar that

there is something of a Trump brand there because now, even if you are not even paying attention to TV, you hear a segment come on and you hear a helicopter hum in the background, it is usually going to involve the president taking questions. It has become a staple and a regular thing that he likes to do.⁹⁵¹

The few press conferences that took place, were characterized by the tensions mentioned in the prior chapter. Stating incorrect information or straight out lies was a persistent issue at the press conferences. White House correspondent Kenneth T. Walsh stated that he (and many of his colleagues) “felt obliged to undertake a constant fact-checking operation on the President.” Moreover, the president’s relationship with the White House correspondents “deteriorated to the point of mutual hostility far beyond the traditional tug

⁹⁴⁷ Ibid., 198–99.

⁹⁴⁸ Gerhard Peters, “Presidential News Conferences.” Refer to Chapter VI.2 or American Presidency Project for the exact classification of exchanges with reporters.

⁹⁴⁹ In contrast to the normally restricted number of correspondents in the questions-and-answer sessions, typically, the sessions on the South Lawn are open to all correspondents.

⁹⁵⁰ Kumar, “Contemporary Presidency - Presidents Meet Reporters: Is Donald Trump an Outlier among Recent Presidents?”: 198–200.

⁹⁵¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 200.

of war between the government and the Fourth Estate,” wrote the correspondent.⁹⁵² Critical questions by the correspondents or pointing out lies often lead to heated interactions.

This tense relationship was already visible during Trump’s first solo press conference on February 16, 2017. It was held in the early afternoon in the East Room and took about 75 minutes. In his over twenty-minute-long opening statement, the president already brought up three frequently reoccurring themes of his communication.⁹⁵³

First, the president argued that the previous administration had left the country in a poor condition for him to fix: “Our administration inherited many problems across Government and across the economy. To be honest, I inherited a mess – it’s a mess – at home and abroad. A mess.” He continued that his administration would “take care of it” and frequently praised himself and his administration in terms “of the things that we’ve done in just a short period of time.”⁹⁵⁴

Second, the president made factually false but easily verifiable claims, and either stuck with them or stated that he was given that information and was thus not to blame if it was wrong. For example, on his election win he stated that he “got 306 electoral college votes. [...] I guess it was the biggest electoral college win since Ronald Reagan.” A correspondent later wanted to clarify the president’s claim stating that “in fact, President Obama got 365 in 2008,” to which the president replied: “Well, I’m talking about Republican.” Whereupon the correspondent pointed out that “George H.W. Bush, [got] 426 when he won.” President Trump then simply blamed someone else, stating that he “was given that information. I don’t know. I was just given. We had a very, very big margin.”⁹⁵⁵

Third, the theme that likely defined his relationship with the media was the “dishonest” and “fake news” media. Again and again, the president attacked the media, calling them “dishonest” and “out of control.” He further claimed that “some of the media is [...] fantastic. But much of it is not.” This charged relationship ran through his first solo press conference where he would utter phrases as “the news is fake” or told correspondents to

⁹⁵² Kenneth T. Walsh, “On the Front Lines of Journalism During the Trump Presidency,” in *Trumping Ethical Norms: Teachers, Preachers, Pollsters, and the Media Respond to Donald Trump*, ed. Louis S. Maisel and Hannah E. Dineen, 37–44 (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 37, 40.

⁹⁵³ “The President’s News Conference | February 16, 2017,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1138> (accessed December 15, 2022); “President Trump Holds a Press Conference | February 16, 2017 | Video,” *Trump White House Archived YouTube Channel*, February 17, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ct0H_ndjavM (accessed December 15, 2022), 00:00-01:16:54.

⁹⁵⁴ “The President’s News Conference | February 16, 2017.”

⁹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

“sit down” or to be “quiet.”⁹⁵⁶ The president also said something on how he saw himself versus the media reporting on him:

But I am having a good time. Tomorrow they will say, ‘Donald Trump rants and raves at the press.’ I’m not ranting and raving. I’m just telling you, you’re dishonest people. But I’m not ranting and raving. I love this. I’m having a good time doing it. But tomorrow the headlines are going to be: ‘Donald Trump Rants and Raves.’ I’m not ranting and raving.⁹⁵⁷

At first glance, it might seem that President Trump lived in a different reality, where his criticism of the media was fully justified since the media was dishonest. Yet statements, in which he expressed that he deliberately attacked the media's credibility to undermine their critical reporting, are proof that there was a strategic element to his denouncement of the media. Although there likely was a component of him feeling treated unfairly as well, he was “ranting and raving” during the press conference to demean the media in the viewers’ eyes.

However, while this first press conference stayed relatively civil, an extreme example of a situation escalating happened on November 7, 2018. *CNN* White House correspondent Jim Acosta clashed with President Trump at a press conference over a question about migrants coming from South America to the U.S. When a female aide attempted to get the microphone from the reporter, Acosta refused to hand it over, blocked the aid, and continued to question the president. After the conference, the Trump White House revoked Acosta’s press credentials, thus, hindering him from getting on the grounds of the White House. Officially the White House reasoned that Acosta had been “placing his hands on a young woman” (the aid) and spread an edited video of the scene.⁹⁵⁸ After a lawsuit by *CNN*, Acosta’s credentials were restored, but the White House also set new rules for press conferences, among other things prohibiting follow-up questions if the president or other

⁹⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁸ Amy B. Wang and Paul Farhi, “White House Suspends Press Pass of *CNN*’s Jim Acosta After His Testy Exchange with Trump,” *The Washington Post*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/11/08/white-house-suspends-pass-cnns-jim-acosta-after-testy-exchange-with-trump/> (accessed February 25, 2022); Sarah Sanders, “Tweet on November 07, 2018, 7:48 P.M. EST,” *@PressSec45 Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/PressSec45/status/1060333176252448768> (accessed December 15, 2022); Sarah Sanders, “Tweet on November 07, 2018, 10:33 P.M. EST,” *@PressSec45 Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/PressSec45/status/1060374680991883265> (accessed December 15, 2022). The original with audio can be watched under Wang and Farhi, the edited version and the statement under Sarah Sanders’ tweets. It is noted that the *@PressSec45 Twitter Account* was archived under the name of the last Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany.

officials did not allow them, threatening “suspension or revocation of the” press passes in cases of violation.⁹⁵⁹

In May 2019, the Trump administration again focused on the White House press corps’ press passes. New requirements were introduced which made almost all press corps members ineligible for hard passes, which allow correspondents to easily enter and exit the White House. After that, the White House decided for which correspondents an “exception” would be made to get their former access status. According to *The Washington Post* journalist Dana Milbank, the correspondents with granted exceptions “serve at the pleasure of press secretary Sarah Sanders because [...] in theory, [they] can have their credentials revoked any time they annoy Trump or his aides.”⁹⁶⁰

The relationship with the press corps was not helped when Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders stopped holding the typically regular press briefings by the press secretary with the White House press corps between mid-March 2019 and the end of her time as press secretary in June 2019. During that time, spontaneous question-and-answer sessions with the press secretary became more important. Moreover, Sanders frequently went on *Fox News* programs where she faced friendly questions.⁹⁶¹ The briefings were said to be unnecessary as the president would regularly take questions from correspondents during other events at the White House.⁹⁶² Sanders’ successor, Stephanie Grisham did not even hold one briefing during her nine months as press secretary. They only started again in

⁹⁵⁹ Susan Heavey et al., “White House Restores Access for CNN’s Acosta, Ending Legal Fight,” *Reuters*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-cnn-idUSKCN1NO1XM> (accessed February 25, 2022); Erik Wemple, “Tweet on November 19, 2018, 3:40 P.M. EST,” *@ErikWemple Twitter Account*, <https://twitter.com/ErikWemple/status/1064619411640934401> (accessed December 15, 2022). Wemple tweeted a picture of the letter by the White House explaining the new rules.

⁹⁶⁰ Dana Milbank, “Opinion: The White House Revoked My Press Pass. It’s Not Just Me – It’s Curtailing Access for All Journalists,” *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-white-house-has-revoked-my-press-pass-its-not-just-me--its-curtailing-access-for-all-journalists/2019/05/08/bb9794b4-71c0-11e9-8be0-ca575670e91c_story.html (accessed March 8, 2022). In March 2019, the White House had informed the correspondents on the new rules. The passes were revoked in May.

⁹⁶¹ Erik Wemple, “Sarah Sanders Chooses Fox News over Briefings,” *The Washington Post*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/22/sarah-sanders-has-appeared-fox-news-least-times-since-her-last-briefing/> (accessed February 18, 2022); Ayesha Rascoe and Sarah McCammon, “Press Secretary Sarah Sanders to Leave the White House,” *NPR*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/13/621483552/press-secretary-sarah-sanders-to-leave-the-white-house?t=1645613347680> (accessed March 8, 2022).

⁹⁶² Ayesha Rascoe and Sarah McCammon, “Press Secretary Sarah Sanders To Leave The White House.”

May 2020 with Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany.⁹⁶³ Such treatment of the correspondents did neither lead to good relations with the White House press corps nor to positive media coverage.

Trump's interactions with the press corps in the first three years of his presidency were defined by question-and-answer sessions or interviews but not press conferences. Solo press conferences had a very low priority for the president and were therefore held rarely. When in 2020, the United States was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, the frequency of press conferences changed drastically. There would still be question-and-answer sessions and interviews, yet from 2020 until his last day in office on January 20, 2021, the president held 36 press conferences (35 solo), which are about 40 percent of all of Trump's press conferences over four years.⁹⁶⁴ However, the atmosphere would stay the same.

A medium Trump had always been highly active on, and which the president seemed to enjoy a lot more than press conferences, was *Twitter*. It perfectly suited his needs.

3. *Donald J. Trump and Twitter*

Donald Trump's social media – more specifically *Twitter* – usage was among the main drivers of his election as President of the United States.⁹⁶⁵ Trump's personal *Twitter* account @realDonaldTrump was created in May 2009 and soon turned out to be an effective tool “for promoting himself, [and] sounding off about politics.” Trump's engagement in the birther movement conspiracy “showcased his talent for propagating a useful lie” and in the period until his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump had had enough time to become a master at “weaponizing” *Twitter*.⁹⁶⁶ During his presidential campaign and later his presidency, Trump “tweeted his thoughts, reactions, and plans” and he “maximized the utility of *Twitter*” with his aggressive demeanor and loose handling of facts.⁹⁶⁷ The medium allowed him to spread his messages without a filter. As his tweets

⁹⁶³ John T. Bennett, “Stephanie Grisham Out as Trump's Press Secretary Without Ever Holding a Briefing,” *The Independent*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/stephanie-grisham-press-secretary-trump-white-house-briefing-why-who-replace-a9452866.html> (accessed March 8, 2022); *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/> (accessed December 15, 2022). A search for the document category of press briefings during Trump's time in office was done for the latter. There were some press briefings in between, yet from different administration officials as for instance Secretary of the Treasury Mnuchin, but none with the press secretary.

⁹⁶⁴ Gerhard Peters, “Presidential News Conferences.”

⁹⁶⁵ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 203.

⁹⁶⁶ Mike McIntire, Karen Yourish and Larry Buchanan, “In Trump's *Twitter* Feed: Conspiracy-Mongers, Racists and Spies,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/02/us/politics/trump-twitter-disinformation.html> (accessed May 29, 2020).

⁹⁶⁷ Moore, *The American President*, 685; Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication and Character*, 4.

were often provocative or outrageous (and in some way entertaining), they attracted the attention of users and the media, increasing their reach. Moreover, there was no time restriction. President Trump could tweet whenever he wanted, and he frequently would do so early in the morning or during the late evening hours.⁹⁶⁸

During his time as president, Donald Trump tweeted or retweeted 26,239 times. When deducting the retweets, Trump still sent 16,584 tweets within four years. Noticeable are the different averages over the four years. The number of tweets per year started at about 2300 in his first and about 3200 in his second year, to reach nearly 5000 in the third and about 6200 in the fourth year. Thus, by year four Trump tweeted nearly triple the times than in year one.⁹⁶⁹ This shows that *Twitter* had increased in its importance to the president. The tweets had two primary functions. By means of the first one, Trump “bypass[ed] the mainstream media” and was able to communicate with his “voters in an unfiltered and unchallenged manner” through the social media platform.⁹⁷⁰ Ingram noted that by offering this alternative source of information about his presidency, Trump constantly “threatens to de-emphasize the White House press corps.”⁹⁷¹ Trump himself said on several occasions, as for instance, in an interview with Tucker Carlson that he “wouldn't be here if it wasn't for *Twitter*.” Moreover, as the media supposedly was not reporting honestly about him, he had to use *Twitter* to “get the word out.” Trump went on explaining that social media were his “own form of media.”⁹⁷² Trump used *Twitter* as his mouthpiece, or as he said: “Social Media [...] gives me a voice because I don't get that voice in the press, [...] so I'm allowed to have a voice.”⁹⁷³

Twitter provided Trump with the opportunity to go against everything and everyone he wanted to. Often, his attacks were directed at the media. He routinely denounced them and their reporting. In his four years in office, “fake news” can be found 872 times in the *Trump*

⁹⁶⁸ *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 16, 2022). Search with filter limiting results to Trump's time in office.

⁹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Search with filters limiting results to Trump's time in office, first including, second excluding retweets. For the yearly tweet count dates were set from the 20th of January to the 19th of January of the next year, retweets excluded.

⁹⁷⁰ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 204–5; Cramer Brownell, “Commentary: Why Presidential Debates Can Cut through the Campaign Hoopla.”

⁹⁷¹ Mathew Ingram, “Trump's Media Strategy Is a Trap, and We're All Taking the Bait,” *Fortune*, January 27, 2017, <https://fortune.com/2017/01/27/trump-media-trap/> (accessed November 3, 2021).

⁹⁷² Chris Cillizza, “Donald Trump's Explanation of His Wire-Tapping Tweets Will Shock and Amaze You,” *The Washington Post*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/03/16/donald-trump-explained-twitter-the-universe-and-everything-to-tucker-carlson/> (accessed April 28, 2020). The article is a transcript of the interview where comments of the author can be added.

⁹⁷³ “02/18/20: President Trump Delivers Remarks Upon Departure | Video,” *Trump White House Archived YouTube Channel*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0R8E1n0JZI> (accessed February 19, 2020), Min. 3:41-3:54.

Twitter Archive.⁹⁷⁴ Besides the more general claims, Trump also used his account for more direct attacks. On July 2, 2017, Donald Trump tweeted an edited video with the hashtags FraudNewsCNN and FNN (Fraud News Network). The original video is from his scripted appearance at a wrestling match in 2007, where he body-slammed Vince McMahon, the World Wrestling Entertainment CEO. McMahon's face was covered by CNN's logo in the edited version.⁹⁷⁵ The cable network released a statement firing back at Trump: "It is a sad day when the President of the United States encourages violence against reporters [...], he is involved in juvenile behavior far below the dignity of his office. We will keep doing our jobs. He should start doing his."⁹⁷⁶

But Trump would not only use *Twitter* to attack people or institutions. He would also use it to voice his approval of media outlets or media members like *Fox News* and *One America News Network (OANN/OAN)*. He even reacted to certain news shows on *Twitter* while they were on television. A study by *Media Matters* found that between September 2018 and August 2020, the president "tweeted in response to Fox News or Fox Business programs" over 1,140 times. Other networks lag far behind with only 60 "live-tweets." This shows the information loop that the president and certain media outlets had, often goading each other on certain issues.⁹⁷⁷

Trump used *Twitter* as a main communication channel and not simply to reiterate messages of other communication channels. As mentioned above, tweeting was a way around the media, but it also offered him the opportunity to bypass advisors and even government bureaucracy. Trump tweeted "breaking news" that had not been published anywhere else by the White House or he contradicted other communication with his tweets.⁹⁷⁸

This leads to the second function. Trump aimed to dominate the news coverage and *Twitter* proved to be a capable tool to achieve this goal.⁹⁷⁹ With his statements on *Twitter* (though not only through his tweets), he managed to steer the daily reporting by the media towards issues he wanted in the news.⁹⁸⁰ The media reported on his tweets and by that not only

⁹⁷⁴ *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 16, 2022). A search was done with filters limiting results to Trump's time in office and the search term "fake news." Retweets were excluded.

⁹⁷⁵ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on July 02, 2017, 9:21 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 16, 2022); Nakamura, "Trump Amps up Threats on Press"; Chris Cillizza, "Why Pro Wrestling is the Perfect Metaphor for Donald Trump's Presidency."

⁹⁷⁶ Jill Disis, "CNN: Trump's Latest Tweet 'Encourages Violence Against Reporters'," *CNN*, July 2, 2017, <https://money.cnn.com/2017/07/02/media/cnn-trump-ww-e-tweet/index.html> (accessed October 21, 2021).

⁹⁷⁷ Matt Gertz, "Study: Two Years of Trump's Live-Tweeting Obsession, by the Numbers," *Media Matters For America*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/donald-trump/study-two-years-trumps-live-tweeting-obsession-numbers> (accessed December 21, 2022).

⁹⁷⁸ Jeremy Shapiro, "The World Will Soon Start Talking Like Trump."

⁹⁷⁹ Farnsworth, *Presidential Communication and Character*, 169.

⁹⁸⁰ Helfert, *Political Communication in Action*, 205; Moore, *The American President*, 685.

spread his message but discussed the topics or issues of the tweets as well. Even if they “only” fact checked the president, their coverage was on the topics of tweets, making it relatively easy for the president to get certain topics in the news and to the public. Jon Herbert argued that these “interventions were timed carefully to distract from unfavorable stories. Trump understood the system and instituted a program of remorseless self-promotion.”⁹⁸¹ Or simply put, *Twitter* was an excellent fit for his communication style. The medium is perfect for “airing grievances, calling out opponents, and floating conspiracy theories, all of which were important to fulfilling Trump’s personal and political needs.”⁹⁸² Overall, this reinforces the strategic aspect behind the president’s tweets and claims.

Unlike his predecessors, Trump as president did not seek to expand his supporter base by trying to appeal more to the general public. He mainly focused on retaining his supporters from the 2016 election.⁹⁸³ Another factor of the Trump presidency were his rallies. He placed a special focus on and continued them during his presidency. Through them, he reinforced his messages. According to Kumar, “tweets, question-and-answer sessions, and political rallies form[ed] the core of his rhetorical kit bag.”⁹⁸⁴ In a different way, Trump brought back the oldest tool of communicating with the public, physically standing in front of an audience holding a speech and interacting with them, just in a 21st century look.

Overall, whereas Obama established the first presidential social media presence, Trump adopted it “as a primary way of enhancing his personal bond with his constituents.”⁹⁸⁵ The use of *Twitter* and circumventing the mainstream media was the essential part of his media strategy and was supported by other forums as his rallies.⁹⁸⁶

In the year 2020, Trump’s crisis management and with it, his media communication was severely tested.

⁹⁸¹ Jon Herbert, “The Presidency,” in *Developments in American Politics 9*, ed. Gillian Peele et al., 117–36 (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 125.

⁹⁸² Kumar, “Contemporary Presidency - Presidents Meet Reporters: Is Donald Trump an Outlier among Recent Presidents?”: 204.

⁹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 206. This source does not include the time of the pandemic, which influenced the possibility of holding rallies. Yet, they stayed an important communications tool.

⁹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁹⁸⁶ Mathew Ingram, “Trump’s Media Strategy Is a Trap, and We’re All Taking the Bait.”

4. *The COVID-19 Pandemic*

The first cases of a new virus started to emerge in Wuhan, China, during the middle of December 2019.⁹⁸⁷ Little did most people expect that their lives would be turned up-side-down through this discovery and that they would learn more than they wished about how viruses spread. As the handful of cases grew into a pandemic, 2020 became a challenging year for President Donald Trump.

In late December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was notified of the occurrence of several pneumonia cases with unknown causes. At the beginning of January 2020, it became clear that a novel coronavirus was behind the cases. That month saw several further developments and it started to look like the new virus would have a larger impact. On the 11th, China announced the first death in connection with the virus. Just a week later, screenings of passengers for symptoms of the new virus at U.S. airports began. Already on January 20, the first case was confirmed in the U.S. By the end of the month, the White House had created the Coronavirus Task Force as well as imposed entry restrictions for travelers who had recently visited China. And both the WHO and the U.S. had officially declared the coronavirus outbreak a health emergency.⁹⁸⁸ In February 2020, the disease caused by the newly identified coronavirus was officially named COVID-19, and in reaction to increasing criticism of the crisis management of the White House, the president appointed his vice president to lead the Coronavirus Task Force.⁹⁸⁹

On March 11th, the World Health Organization officially announced that the coronavirus outbreak had reached the status of a pandemic. On the same day, President Trump ordered travel restrictions for travel from European countries in order to reduce the speed at which the virus was spreading. Just two days later, the president declared a countrywide state of emergency, and on March 15, states initiated first shut down measures like closing restaurants or schools. The same month, to counter the negative effects of the pandemic, bills were passed by Congress and signed by President Trump. The most expensive and prominent one was the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) that made available two trillion dollars in economic support, for example for businesses or for one-time payments to Americans. On the medical front, March saw the start of the first

⁹⁸⁷ “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline.”

⁹⁸⁸ Ibid; Derrick T. Bryson, “A Timeline of the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html> (accessed February 2, 2022).

⁹⁸⁹ “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline”; CNN Editorial Research, “Covid-19 Pandemic Timeline Fast Facts,” *CNN*, January 5, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/09/health/covid-19-pandemic-timeline-fast-facts/index.html> (accessed January 31, 2022).

human coronavirus vaccine trial and an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) of chloroquine phosphate and hydroxychloroquine sulfate for COVID-19 patients in hospitals.⁹⁹⁰

In April 2020, there were some significant changes in the administration's pandemic politics. The administration reversed its stance on mask usage. From now on, a mask should be worn by everyone, not only sick people according to new CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) guidelines. On April 13, the president stated during a press briefing that he would terminate U.S. financial contributions to the WHO. This announcement – made while a pandemic kept the world on tenterhooks – sent shockwaves through the health community. By the end of April, a program called Operation Warp Speed had been launched with the goal of expediting the development and production of vaccines against COVID-19. And in early May, the antiviral medication remdesivir received an EUA for use in hospitalized COVID-19 patients.⁹⁹¹ At the same time, however, the pandemic continued to take its toll on Americans. The unemployment rate rose to 14.7 percent, being “the worst rate since the Great Depression,” and by the end of May the number of deaths in the U.S. caused by COVID-19 had exceeded 100,000.⁹⁹²

The Trump administration further escalated the conflict with the WHO in July, submitting the official withdrawal of the United States from the organization on the 7th. This move was seen very critical as the country was still in the middle of a pandemic.⁹⁹³ The general situation did not get any better. On August 2, the U.S. exceeded 150,000 COVID-19 deaths. Although by mid-September many parts of the country started to see a decline in cases, the Midwest, a region that had formerly been spared by the worst, experienced a rise.⁹⁹⁴ And by the end of the month, another sad number was reached when the United States had registered over 200,000 deaths due to COVID-19.⁹⁹⁵

October 2020 was off to a bad start for Donald Trump, as on October 2, he and the First Lady became infected with COVID-19. A few days later, several staff did so as well.⁹⁹⁶

⁹⁹⁰ “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline”; CNN Editorial Research, “Covid-19 Pandemic Timeline Fast Facts.”

⁹⁹¹ “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline”; CNN Editorial Research, “Covid-19 Pandemic Timeline Fast Facts.”

⁹⁹² “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline.”

⁹⁹³ CNN Editorial Research, “Covid-19 Pandemic Timeline Fast Facts.” The withdrawal would have become effective a year later, but President Biden stopped the process after his inauguration.

⁹⁹⁴ Derrick T. Bryson, “A Timeline of the Coronavirus Pandemic.”

⁹⁹⁵ “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline.”

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid.

At the beginning of November 2020, President Donald Trump lost his reelection bid against Democrat Joseph R. Biden, forecasting a major shift in coronavirus politics. The handling of the pandemic had been a major contributing factor in Trump's failed reelection campaign. Many Americans felt the impact of the pandemic on their plates. Food insecurity had risen by almost 50 percent to 52 million people.⁹⁹⁷ Unfortunately for Trump major medical achievements came only in December 2020, after the election.

Vaccines of the companies Pfizer/BioNTech (December 11) and Moderna (December 18) got EUAs, and by December 24, over one million Americans had already received them. Moreover, another relief bill was passed that, for example, provided 600 dollars per person. Besides these developments, the pandemic had and would continue to have a firm grip on Americans. After having recorded more than 300,000 coronavirus deaths by mid-December, the number rose to 400,000 a month later. A major problem in the following months would be the shortage of vaccines, yet it was now President Biden's task to solve that problem.⁹⁹⁸

The pandemic also presented a particular challenge to Trump's media interactions.

4.1 Press Conferences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

With the pandemic hitting the United States in 2020, Trump started to hold press conferences much more frequently, with about 40 percent of all his press conferences taking place in his last year in office.⁹⁹⁹ COVID-19 was the major topic of 2020, and the president was asked in nearly all of his 2020 press conferences about the pandemic. The subsequent part analyzes a selection of press conferences of 2020. Press conferences were either chosen because of the large number of questions on the pandemic asked or the fact that they contained particularly insightful exchanges between the reporters and the president, for example on the drug hydroxychloroquine.

Since March 11, 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 had been considered a pandemic and on March 13, a national emergency was declared by President Trump.¹⁰⁰⁰ The same day, he

⁹⁹⁷ Ibid. For studies on the impact of President Trump's handling of the pandemic on his failed reelection campaign see Leonardo Baccini, Abel Brodeur and Stephen Weymouth, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election," *IZA DP*, no. 13862 (November 2020), <https://docs.iza.org/dp13862.pdf> (accessed January 24, 2023); Harold Clarke, Marianne C. Stewart and Karl Ho, "Did Covid-19 Kill Trump Politically? The Pandemic and Voting in the 2020 Presidential Election," *Social Science Quarterly*, 102, no. 5 (2021), 2194–209.

⁹⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁹ Gerhard Peters, "Presidential News Conferences." The analysis focuses on the press conferences, though it should be mentioned that the president was also present during several press briefings.

¹⁰⁰⁰ "CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline"; CNN Editorial Research, "Covid-19 Pandemic Timeline Fast Facts."

held a news conference along with members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force. During the conference, correspondents directed questions to President Trump as well as members of the task force. The opening statements took over half an hour as not only Trump, but several other people spoke.¹⁰⁰¹ Typically, during their opening statements presidents talk about the issues they deem important, but they also try to steer the press conference's questions towards these topics. The degree to which Trump's opening statements on the pandemic steered the press conferences is difficult to evaluate as the pandemic was the main topic for most of the year. Thus, it is impossible to distinguish between the effect of the opening statement and the general urgency that made correspondents ask questions on the pandemic or Trump's pandemic policies. The correspondents would most likely have asked many questions on the pandemic even if Trump had not mentioned it in his opening statement.

On several questions on the coronavirus, Trump gave matter-of-fact answers, meaning he answered the questions. However, this type of answer was not representative of most of Trump's exchanges during his press conferences, in particular when being confronted with critical or challenging questions. The president used several strategies to avoid having to answer questions that were in parts already visible during his first press conference.

One strategy by Trump was to pass on questions he did not like to members of the task force present during the conferences. This was a convenient way for him to get around the question, but have it answered by someone else. It was visible in an exchange of the March 13 press conference. Trump had frequently stated the factually false claim that everybody who needed a test could get one. When he was asked on the scarce availability of coronavirus tests, he quickly handed the question to his vice president:

Q. [...] we've been hearing from doctors who say, as of today, they still can't get patients tested who need a test. So, as of today, can everyone who a doctor wants to have tested get tested? And if not, when? When will doctors –

The President. Well, that's been true for a while. But I'll let Mike – why don't you answer that, Mike, please?¹⁰⁰²

¹⁰⁰¹ “The President's News Conference | March 13, 2020,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1239> (accessed July 27, 2022); “President Trump Holds a Press Conference | March 13, 2020 | Video,” *Trump White House Archived YouTube Channel*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeTYINvuWM4> (accessed December 21, 2022), 00:00-35:31.

¹⁰⁰² “The President's News Conference | March 13, 2020.” Correspondents are only mentioned by name in exceptional cases, as the transcripts of the press conferences do not identify the reporters by name.

This was an easy way to not have to defend his own wrong claims. Also, Trump frequently did not answer the actual question but circled around it by giving information somewhat connected to the question's general topic as the following exchange shows:

Q. [...] Prime Minister Modi, or India, have closed borders until April 15. If you have spoken with the Prime Minister of India, and if they have needed any help? [...]

The President. [...] We had a great time in India. It was an incredible two days, and he's a great friend of mine. And he's a friend of his people, because he was greeted incredibly warmly, as was I, in that stadium; that was an incredible event. And I loved being with him, so just say hello to him. But we – we talked about everything. We talked about far more than just borders.¹⁰⁰³

The answer is not completely off-topic, yet Trump did not answer the actual question of the correspondent. This is something many politicians do when answering questions. However, in Trump's case the answers could be relatively far from the original question. Moreover, Trump often only partially answered questions. This could mean that he either answered only a part of a question, or he did not address all the questions asked. This can be seen in this exchange:

Q. [...] you have mentioned that the number [of cases] in China has been decreasing and China has made tremendous progress in the past 2 weeks. [...] I'm wondering how much confidence does this give you to control the virus in the United States. And do you see the data China has been sharing with the United States has been helpful?

The President. I think it has been helpful. We've been working very much with China. I've spoken, as you know, with President Xi. They went through hell, and their numbers are starting to look very good. They're really looking very good. We're very happy about that. We are sharing data, yes. In fact, we're sharing quite a bit of data, including the fact that some of our pharmaceutical companies are working over there right now with large groups of people.¹⁰⁰⁴

In this case, Trump did not answer the first question on his confidence to control the virus, but he answered the second question. Though, he did not go into detail on how the sharing of data had been helpful.

If Donald Trump was very displeased by a question, he would openly voice his disagreement. During the same press conference, he was asked whether he would take responsibility for the difficulties with testing capacity, which he strongly declined. Yamiche Alcindor from *PBS NewsHour* picked up this topic:

¹⁰⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Ibid.

Q. [...] You said that you don't take responsibility, but you did disband the White House pandemic office, and the officials that were working in that office left this administration abruptly. So what responsibility do you take to that? And the officials that worked in that office said that [...] the White House lost valuable time because that office was disbanded. What do you make of that?

The President. Well, I just think it's a nasty question, because what we've done is – and Tony [Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases] has said numerous times that we've saved thousands of lives because of the quick closing. And when you say 'me,' I didn't do it. We have a group of people I could –

Q. It's your administration.

The President. I could ask perhaps – my administration – but I could perhaps ask Tony about that, because I don't know anything about it. I mean, you say – you say we did that. I don't know anything about it.¹⁰⁰⁵

Besides calling a legitimate question “nasty,” Trump seemed to argue he did not know about the disbanding. This then directly led to a follow-up from the reporter, wondering whether the president was unaware of what had happened in the National Security Council:

Q. You don't know about the [...] reorganization that happened at the National Security Council?

The President. It's the – it's the administration. Perhaps they do that. You know, people let people go. You used to be with a different newspaper than you are now. You know, things like that happen.

Q. But this was a –

The President. Okay. Please go ahead.

Q. This was an organization at the National Security Council.

The President. We're doing a great job. Let me tell you, these professionals behind me and the – these great, incredible doctors and business people – the best in the world. We're doing a great job.

[...] But we've done a great job because we acted quickly. We acted early. And there's nothing we could have done that was better than closing our borders to highly infected areas. Please, go ahead.¹⁰⁰⁶

Here it seems like Trump tried to get out of the question, distancing himself from the issue, yet by doing so maneuvered himself into a corner. He resolved this by giving a longer appraisal of his administration before employing another frequently used strategy, quickly calling on another reporter. This excerpt is also exemplary for the chaotic exchanges

¹⁰⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Ibid.

between the president and correspondents, which were characterized by frequent interruptions from both sides. The president regularly spoke over the reporters or did not let them finish their questions. However, correspondents also often interjected. Like Alcindor, they wanted to follow up on Trump's statements or get the president to answer their question.

One month later, Trump held his next press conference. It started with an extremely long and protracted opening statement. The president and several business professionals, including the CEO of the *American Hospital Association* spoke during the statement, yet most of it was delivered by the president himself. Overall, the opening statement took nearly 48 minutes, with Trump talking for close to 42 minutes (equaling around 5,900 words). At one point, the president – for minutes – read out lists of companies the administration wanted to be in contact with concerning the pandemic. In spite of the long opening statement and the few remaining minutes, the president called on 16 correspondents. However, from the one hour and seven minutes press conference, only about 19 minutes remained for questions, which is relatively short compared to the time span of the opening statement.¹⁰⁰⁷

This press conference was dominated by two further frequently used strategies of Trump to answer questions. One was not accepting the question by the reporter, for instance by not letting them finish the question. This often turned press conferences into heated exchanges. As mentioned above, if Trump did not like the question or when he became tired of the questioning by the reporter, he switched to ending the exchange by telling the correspondent to stop talking, often calling on the next correspondent before the question was answered. These were the ultimate means to avert having to give an answer at all or to prevent follow-up questions. The following longer excerpt is intended to show the two strategies:

QI. Yes, thank you. Today: 600,000 cases, 25,000 deaths. I know you want to bring – blame the WHO, but I've spoken to hundreds of people across the country in the last few weeks who say they still can't get tested and that they aren't social distancing, because they saw –

The President. So the Governors –

QI. Wait – wait a minute. Let me finish.

The President. Yes. Yes. Yes.

¹⁰⁰⁷ “The President's News Conference | April 14, 2020,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1240> (accessed August 10, 2022); “4/14/20: Members of the Coronavirus Task Force Hold a Press Briefing | Video,” *Trump White House Archived YouTube Channel*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dBxsB5o5nk> (accessed December 21, 2022).

Q1. So they aren't –

The President. Excuse me. Excuse me. I know – I know your question. You ready?

Q1. Well, no, you don't. No –

The President. The Governors – the Governors are supposed to do testing. It's up to the Governors.

[directed at another reporter] Go ahead please.¹⁰⁰⁸

In the subsequent part of the exchange the president at several times pointed with his finger at the reporter, telling the reporter to be quiet and looked angered:

Q1. That's not the question. Wait a minute, Mr. President. That's not the question.

The President. [directed at another reporter] Go ahead please.

Q2. Mr. President, if we could just – if we could just get back May 1 –

Q1. The question –

The President. Quiet.

Q1. The question was –

The President. Quiet.

Q1. The question, Mr. President –

The President. Quiet.

Q1. The question is – [...] they say that they are not – that they are following your lead, that they are not social distancing.

The President. The Governors are doing the testing. It's now not up – and it hasn't been up – to the Federal Government.

[directed at another reporter] Go ahead.

Q1. That's not what I'm asking. The question is about social distancing, sir.

Q2. Mr. President, I have a quick follow on the WHO, but if May 1 –

Q1. The question is if –

The President. I told them when they put this guy here, it's nothing but trouble. He's a showboat.

Q1. I'm just trying to ask you a question.

The President. If you keep talking, I'll leave –

Q1. I'm just trying to ask a question.

The President. – and you can have it out with the rest of these people.

Q1. I'm just trying to ask a question. I'm just –

The President. If you keep talking, I'm going to leave, and you can have it out with them.

[...] Just a loudmouth. [directed at another reporter] Go ahead.¹⁰⁰⁹

¹⁰⁰⁸ “The President's News Conference | April 14, 2020.”

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ibid; “4/14/20: Members of the Coronavirus Task Force Hold a Press Briefing | Video,” 54:01-54:38. Since the correspondents also interrupt each other, in such cases the different questioners are numbered Q1

It is likely that the president did not like where this question was going and was already angered by the first part of the question with the correspondent implying that Trump was not telling the truth. In the end, he insulted the correspondent and went on to the next reporter. After not being able to ask his question, the correspondent looked angered.¹⁰¹⁰ As this exchange indicates, President Trump often used several of his preferred strategies to get out of a question he did not like. Below almost the entire exchange is shown, so that all strategies and their application can be seen.

Q1. Do you want to walk back where you did praise China in January for being transparent about the coronavirus?

The President. I'm always respectful of China.

Q1. But –

The President. I'm respectful of other countries. Why wouldn't I be respectful of China? In the meantime, China has paid us nothing in your last administration, nothing in any previous administration. [...]

Trump continued here by talking about the trade deal and the stopping of the funding of the WHO.

Q1. But that's not my question. You're criticizing the WHO for praising China for being transparent, but you also praised China for being transparent in January.

The President. I don't talk about China's transparency.

Q1. In January, there was a tweet.

The President. Well, you know, if I'm so good to China, how come I was the only person – the only leader of a country – that closed our borders tightly against China?

Q1. I'm talking about how you said they were transparent.

The President. And by the way, when I closed our border, that was long ahead of what anybody [...]. I was the one person that wanted to do it. [...] You know why? Because I don't believe everything I hear, and I closed. And if we didn't close our border early, very early, long before the kind of dates you're talking about – we would have had thousands and probably hundreds of thousands more death.

[directed at another reporter] Please.

Q1. I'm talking about how you said –

Q2. Mr. President –

The President. Please. That's enough. Thank you.¹⁰¹¹

and Q2. This difference is not made in the original transcripts. The parts could be attributed by listening to the available videos and discerning the different voices of the correspondents.

¹⁰¹⁰ “4/14/20: Members of the Coronavirus Task Force Hold a Press Briefing | Video,” 54:40-54:48.

¹⁰¹¹ “The President's News Conference | April 14, 2020”; “4/14/20: Members of the Coronavirus Task Force Hold a Press Briefing | Video,” 56:25-58:33.

This exchange shows that when he gave his answers, Trump ignored the actual question and talked about issues he preferred to talk about. When he had enough of the correspondent trying to get him to answer her question on transparency, Trump ended the exchange by stating “That’s enough” and called on the next reporter. Thus, he combined several strategies: not answering the actual question, talking over the reporter, and ending the exchange before the question was answered.

Overall, although Donald Trump only took questions for about twenty minutes, he called on 16 correspondents, which on the surface seems a lot. However, Trump frequently did not give answers to questions asked or cut off the reporters, and it is thus questionable how valuable the press conference was for the correspondents. But at least many of them got to ask a question.

According to *The American Presidency Project’s* count, there were no solo press conferences between mid-May and mid-July 2020.¹⁰¹² This is at odds with the Trump White House classifications. For example, on June 5, 2020, according to the Trump White House, the president held a press conference in the Rose Garden.¹⁰¹³ *The American Presidency Project* classified the same event as remarks with an exchange with reporters, as the president delivered a statement in front of the press corps and would only half-heartedly respond to one question.¹⁰¹⁴ This observation is supported by a *Politico* article of July 2020, that stated:

The White House’s ever-mutating press conferences have found a new form. [...] The president has, in recent weeks, cut back his own free-for-all press conferences from early 2020 [...] Instead, Trump has been gathering reporters for a self-described ‘press conference’ or ‘news conference,’ only to make long speeches straight into the TV camera before walking off without taking any questions.¹⁰¹⁵

¹⁰¹² *The American Presidency Project* (accessed December 22, 2022). A search for the document category of news conferences for the year 2020 until the end of Trump’s presidency was done. During the two months break in solo press conferences, only one joint press conference with the President of Poland Andrzej Duda took place on June 24.

¹⁰¹³ “President Trump Holds a Press Conference | June 05, 2020,” *Trump White House Archived YouTube Channel*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pctCaQDJENw> (accessed December 22, 2022). A Google search revealed that the Trump White House does not appear to have provided a transcript of the event, only the video from the Trump White House YouTube channel. Though the White House provided “Remarks By President Trump In A Roundtable On Supporting America’s Commercial Fishermen,” which took place the same day. In this transcript, Trump referred to the Rose Garden event, calling it a press conference.

¹⁰¹⁴ “Remarks on the Bureau of Labor Statistics Report on the Employment Situation in May and an Exchange with Reporters | June 05, 2020,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-bureau-labor-statistics-report-the-employment-situation-may-and-exchange-with> (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰¹⁵ Meredith McGraw, “The White House’s New Briefing Strategy: Short, with Lots of Commentary,” *Politico*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/10/briefings-white-house-355760> (accessed December 22, 2022).

The reason for Trump not answering questions anymore might be found in a tweet by the president on April 25, where he complained about the press corps' reporting and questioned the meaning of the press conferences:

What is the purpose of having White House News Conferences when the Lamestream Media asks nothing but hostile questions, & then refuses to report the truth or facts accurately. They get record ratings, & the American people get nothing but Fake News. Not worth the time & effort!¹⁰¹⁶

The American Presidency Project again lists press conference after mid-July. From then on there were again very frequent press conferences until Trump's last press conference on September 27, 2020.

On July 28, 2020, the president met with correspondents in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room. The press conference was quite short with an overall time of a little over 26 minutes. Since the opening statement took nearly 16 minutes, this left only about ten minutes for questions.¹⁰¹⁷

In his opening statement, the president covered many topics, from vaccine development and the production of protective gear to the job and stock market. Although many topics were covered, the opening statement did not noticeably influence the questions of the reporters. The president was comparatively calm when answering the questions during this press conference, however, this did not mean that he would not try to avoid answering questions.

As during prior press conferences, the president would somewhat answer questions, yet then start talking about a different topic, not related to the actual questions. For instance, correspondent John Roberts from *Fox News* asked the president on one of his tweets which claimed that Anthony Fauci "misled the country about hydroxychloroquine" and wanted to know what the president meant by that. The president denied this, arguing: "No, not at all. I think – I don't even know what his stance is on it," and then went on to talk about his relationship with Fauci as well as the doctor's approval ratings.¹⁰¹⁸

¹⁰¹⁶ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on April 25, 2020, 6:01 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰¹⁷ "The President's News Conference | July 28, 2020," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1246> (accessed August 18, 2022); "07/28/20: President Trump Holds a News Conference | Video," *Trump White House Archived YouTube Channel*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnaYpmk811c> (accessed December 21, 2022). When the camera switched to the reporters, one can see fewer reporters than for a typical press conference before the pandemic as they were all sitting socially distanced.

¹⁰¹⁸ "The President's News Conference | July 28, 2020."

Hydroxychloroquine was an important topic at this conference as the president had retweeted a video in which a doctor claimed that the drug would cure COVID-19. Thus, the president was asked on his view regarding the efficacy of the drug. He stated that he believed in the efficacy and cited as one source the said video:

There was a woman who was spectacular in her statements about it, that she's had tremendous success with it. And they took her [...] voice off. I don't know why they took her off, but they took her off. Maybe they had a good reason, maybe they didn't. I don't know.¹⁰¹⁹

Later during the conference, another correspondent would follow-up on this:

Q. Mr. President, the woman that you said is a great doctor in that video that you retweeted last night said masks don't work and there is a cure for COVID-19, both of which health experts say is not true. She's also made videos saying that doctors make medicine using DNA from aliens, and that they're trying to create a vaccine to make you immune from becoming religious.

The President. Well, maybe it's a saying, maybe it's not.

Q. So what's the logic in retweeting that?

The President. But I can – I can tell you this: She was on air, along with many other doctors. They were big fans of hydroxychloroquine, and I thought she was very impressive in the sense that, from where she came –

Q. It's misinformation.

The President. – I don't know which country she comes from, but she said that she's had tremendous success with hundreds of different patients. And I thought her voice was an important voice, but I know nothing about her.

Q. But she said masks don't work. And last week, you said masks –

Yes, go ahead. Paula [Paula Reid, *CBS News*].

Q. Last week –

The President. Go ahead.

Q. Well, real quick. Last week, you said masks –

The President. Okay. Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you.¹⁰²⁰

Trump obviously did not like the follow-ups and the exchange became heated quickly. When the president had enough, he simply ended the press conference. This was a very typical reaction by Trump when he was questioned on problematic or misinformative statements or tweets. As stated, an easy way out of such questioning was either calling on the next reporter or – as in this case – ending the press conference. The latter can also be

¹⁰¹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁰ Ibid.

seen as some sort of punishment for all correspondents. That Trump at least at times saw it this way can be seen in the press conference of April 14, 2020, where he threatened to leave, and implied that the correspondent would be to blame if his colleagues were unable to ask further questions.¹⁰²¹ Such threats by Trump do not correspond to what is considered appropriate behavior for a president, in particular if he was asked a valid question.

On August 7, 2020, President Trump held an about 40-minute-long press conference at Trump National Golf Club Bedminster, New Jersey.¹⁰²² The conference was announced on short notice, about one hour before it took place.¹⁰²³ According to media reports and photos taken, dozens of club members gathered at the location to watch the president's press conference. At the beginning, most did not wear masks or practiced social distance. After attending correspondents had tweeted about this, they were given masks by staff.¹⁰²⁴ In the video of the press conference, one can hear the club members frequently laugh, applaud and boo in the background and the president referred to them during his press conference.¹⁰²⁵

President Trump's opening statement was long with close to 31 minutes, particularly in comparison with the overall time of the whole press conference.¹⁰²⁶ During his opening statement, Trump covered a host of topics, most related to the pandemic. Among other things, he talked about protective medical equipment, testing capacity, and supplies. However, the upcoming presidential election in November 2020 had become an ever-increasing important topic to the president, thus he frequently brought it up. He also did so during his opening statement, connecting issues of the pandemic with his reelection campaign and at the same time attacking Democratic Congressional leaders:

¹⁰²¹ "The President's News Conference | April 14, 2020."

¹⁰²² "The President's News Conference in Bedminster, New Jersey | August 7, 2020," *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-bedminster-new-jersey> (accessed August 25, 2022); "08/07/20: President Trump Holds a News Conference | Video," *Trump White House Archived YouTube Channel*, August 8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhCb7QIEJAU> (accessed December 21, 2022).

¹⁰²³ Jonathan Lemire, "At His New Jersey Golf Club, Trump Finds Supportive Audience," *Associated Press News*, August 9, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-new-jersey-ap-top-news-nj-state-wire-donald-trump-16c9d20d2286da893fa5317c98df68a5> (accessed August 26, 2022); Daniel Politi, "Golf Club Guests Cheer Trump as He Says They Don't Have to Wear Masks: 'Peaceful Protest'," *Slate*, August 8, 2020, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/08/golf-club-bedminster-cheer-trump-masks-peaceful-protest.html> (accessed August 26, 2022).

¹⁰²⁴ Jonathan Lemire, "At His New Jersey Golf Club, Trump Finds Supportive Audience"; Daniel Politi, "Golf Club Guests Cheer Trump as He Says They Don't Have to Wear Masks: 'Peaceful Protest'."

¹⁰²⁵ "08/07/20: President Trump Holds a News Conference | Video."

¹⁰²⁶ *Ibid.*

My administration continues to work in good faith to reach an agreement with Democrats in Congress that will extend unemployment benefits; provide protections against evictions; [...] And get relief to American families.

Yet, tragically, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer continue to insist on radical leftwing policies that have nothing to do with the China virus. Nothing to do with it at all. So you have a virus that comes in, and you have people in Congress that don't want to help our people.¹⁰²⁷

In this case, he used the press conference as an outlet for his claims and re-election campaign efforts, which made him, and his administration look good and the Democrats evil. In the polarized media environment that Trump acted in, his supporters would largely only hear his words without any counterargument on the news outlets that supported his presidency and who rarely dared to disagree with him. The latter was very likely because of monetary reasons. It indicates the power Trump had over certain media outlets by bringing higher ratings and thus profit.¹⁰²⁸

Yet, Trump not only used his opening statement for promoting his policies and frequently untrue claims, he also directly attacked the reporting of media outlets he did not like, arguing that on coronavirus cases, “in the United States, more than 80 percent of jurisdictions report decline in cases. We're doing very well. You don't hear that too often from the media, but we're doing very well.”¹⁰²⁹ It is questionable whether “doing very well” was the appropriate description for the situation. Although case numbers were dropping, this is not the only statistic or circumstance that should lead to an assessment of the current situation. For instance, the death toll had exceeded the 150,000 mark five days prior to the press conference, the pandemic was still ongoing, and cases would – as already predicted – go up quickly after the summer.¹⁰³⁰ Even if Trump’s statement on the media’s reporting was true, the media might simply not describe this situation as “doing very well.”

¹⁰²⁷ “The President's News Conference in Bedminster, New Jersey | August 7, 2020.”

¹⁰²⁸ While this cannot be proven for this period, new evidence from a defamation lawsuit filed by Dominion Voting Systems against *Fox News Network/Fox Corporation* shows that the Chairman Rupert Murdoch, as well as other executives and individual journalists, knew that the narrative of the stolen 2020 presidential election was a lie. On air, however, they communicated the opposite. Through private messages of the employees, it became clear that the migration of viewers to other networks and, in this context, profits and stock prices played a role in the promotion of the lie. This also sheds a whole new light on the extent of the power Trump had over the network. For further information: Jeremy W Peters and Katie Robertson, “Fox Stars Privately Expressed Disbelief About Trump’s Election Fraud Claims. ‘Crazy Stuff,’” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/16/business/media/fox-dominion-lawsuit.html?searchResultPosition=3> (accessed March 6, 2023).

¹⁰²⁹ “The President's News Conference in Bedminster, New Jersey | August 7, 2020.”

¹⁰³⁰ Derrick T. Bryson, “A Timeline of the Coronavirus Pandemic”; “COVID-19 United States Cases by County,” *Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center*, August 25, 2022, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/us-map> (accessed August 25, 2022).

Moreover, there were daily trackers of case numbers by media outlets Trump did not like, as for instance, *The New York Times*. Thus, the media had reported on dropping cases, yet maybe not as enthusiastically as the president had wished.¹⁰³¹ Overall, Trump's critique was mainly for his supporters to rally behind him and not based on any evidence.

After the statement, the president took questions for about nine minutes and called on seven reporters. Five of them asked Trump questions related to the pandemic. He opened the question part of the press conference with the following:

So, with that, I'll take a few questions from the media. They've been here for a long time, and they've been waiting outside for a long time. And they wait for these moments. So it was a lot of fun. [Laughter]¹⁰³²

The attending club members laughed at Trump provocatively saying he made the media wait "for a long time" and that they craved the interaction with him, implying him having power over them. If President Trump was interested in good relations with the media, he would not have said this. Moreover, certain media outlets were more useful to his presidency and narrative as his declared enemies. The last question of the press conference shows that as well.

Trump answered the first four questions on the pandemic in a similar style as during prior press conferences. This time, he answered them in a comparatively calm manner and at least partially addressed the questions. An interesting aspect in three of his four answers was the strong focus on the election. The president included election related claims irrespective of whether they fit the original question or not. A claim he frequently brought up was the Democrats trying to steal the election. This shows that the election was coming closer, and Trump was in permanent campaign mode.¹⁰³³

In the final question of the press conference, a correspondent challenged Trump's assessment of the status of the pandemic and critically referred to the make-up of the room.

It is important to note that the club members booed the question:

You said that the pandemic is disappearing, but we lost 6,000 Americans this week. And just in this room, you have dozens of people who are not following the guidelines in New Jersey which say you should not have more than 25 people – .¹⁰³⁴

¹⁰³¹ "Covid in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Counts," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html> (accessed October 18, 2022). This is a continuously updated website with various statistics and data on the development of the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹⁰³² "The President's News Conference in Bedminster, New Jersey | August 7, 2020."

¹⁰³³ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁴ Ibid.

In his answer, Trump included his supporters in the room. First, Trump argued that the regulation would not apply because the exceptions for “political activity” and “peaceful protest” would apply, causing the supporters to laugh, cheer and clap approvingly:

The President. No, they don't have to. This is a political activity.

Audience members. Boo!

Q. So why are you setting a – why are you setting such a bad example, Mr. President, for the country?

The President. Yes. You're wrong on that, because it's a political activity. They have exceptions. Political activity. [...] And it's also a peaceful protest. [Laughter]¹⁰³⁵

The president then switched to attacking the media and his supporters vocally agreed:

I'd call it ‘peaceful protests’ because they heard you were coming up. And they know the news is fake. They understand it better than anybody.

Audience members. Yes! [Applause]

The President. They asked whether or not – they asked whether or not they could be here. [...] If the press in this country were honest, if it wasn't corrupt, if it wasn't fake, our country would be so much further ahead. But we're doing really great. [Applause] Thank you all very much. Thank you.¹⁰³⁶

Trump called the media “fake news,” claimed they were corrupt and harming the country and then simply ended the press conference under applause and cheers by his “audience.”¹⁰³⁷

The most striking aspect of this exchange is the character it took on, which comes across well on the video. Trump used his trademark charges of “fake news” and dishonest media, and the supporters reacted enthusiastically to it. Daniel Politi rightly observed: “The news conference suddenly took on the feel of a small Trump rally.”¹⁰³⁸

Trump knew his supporters would like these statements and turned the press conference into a small campaign event. The media, for whom the forum of a press conference is intended, stood on the side lines and became tools for his repeated messages. This shows the influence of the upcoming presidential election on the way Trump approached his press conferences.

There were some media reports stating that before the press conference, Trump could be heard saying to club members on the White House livestream: “You’ll get to meet the fake

¹⁰³⁵ Ibid; “08/07/20: President Trump Holds a News Conference | Video,” 38:08-38:40.

¹⁰³⁶ “The President's News Conference in Bedminster, New Jersey | August 7, 2020.” Every time applause is indicated in the transcript, the audience also cheered and clapped.

¹⁰³⁷ “08/07/20: President Trump Holds a News Conference | Video,” 38:58-39:34.

¹⁰³⁸ Daniel Politi, “Golf Club Guests Cheer Trump as He Says They Don’t Have to Wear Masks: ‘Peaceful Protest’.”

news tonight. You'll get to see what I have to go through. [...] Oh, all my killers are there, wow. So you'll get to see some of the people that we deal with every day."¹⁰³⁹ This did fit well into the picture of a press conference that was held more for the audience than for the correspondents.

How far the relationship between President Trump and what he called “fake news” media had deteriorated became visible during another press conference just couple of days later; this time, however, in form of a question by a correspondent. Yet, the overall press conference was not dominated by a heated atmosphere but rather calm. Trump gave an about eighteen-and-a-half-minute long statement where he covered several topics. In it, he focused on election related issues, made several false claims, and criticized Democratic presidential candidate Joseph R. Biden. During one of his attacks, Trump stated that

Biden [...] refuses to take questions. He never takes questions. I take questions; he never takes questions. And you sort of wonder what's going on, because they're not that difficult.

Some can be nasty, but they're not that difficult. But he never takes questions.¹⁰⁴⁰

Disregarding his claim on Biden, Trump also slipped in a criticism on the media who – at times – asked “nasty” questions. However, this was just a small note and did not result in any further criticism.

The press conference went on with the president answering questions for about twenty-five minutes.¹⁰⁴¹ As during other press conferences, Trump often did not answer the actual question, frequently tried to end the exchange by calling on a different reporter or made false claims during his answers. Moreover, he brought up the election or election-related issues where he could. He also praised one reporter for asking a good question.¹⁰⁴²

However, the most notable question of the press conference was asked by Shirish V. Dáte from *The Huffington Post*:

Q. Sir, Mr. President, after 3½ years, do you regret, at all, all the lying you've done to the American people on everything?

The President. All the what?

Q. All the lying. All the dishonesties.

The President. That who has done?

¹⁰³⁹ Jonathan Lemire, “At His New Jersey Golf Club, Trump Finds Supportive Audience.”

¹⁰⁴⁰ “The President's News Conference | August 13, 2020,” *The American Presidency Project*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1255> (accessed September 2, 2022); “08/13/20: President Trump Holds a News Conference | Video,” *Trump White House Archived YouTube Channel*, August 14, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmLOJ_rfXjo (accessed December 21, 2022), 00:00-18:28.

¹⁰⁴¹ “08/13/20: President Trump Holds a News Conference | Video.”

¹⁰⁴² “The President's News Conference | August 13, 2020.”

Q. You have done. Tens of thousands –

The President. [directed at another reporter] Yes, go ahead. Please. Please. Go ahead.¹⁰⁴³

This was an extremely provocative question by D ate. After some confusion by Trump who made sure he had understood the question correctly, he shortly paused, looked irritated and then simply called on the next reporter, acting fully unfazed during the following answer and the further press conference.¹⁰⁴⁴ Factually, the question was correct. Trump was unique in comparison with former presidents on the amount of lies he told during his presidency, many of them being blatant and easily refutable. By this day, Trump had uttered 21,571 false or misleading claims.¹⁰⁴⁵

But even considering this, the question was still greatly provocative. It was so astounding that it caused another correspondent, visible in the video of the press conference, to raise his eyebrows and look shocked.¹⁰⁴⁶ The fact that a question like that was asked is proof how far the relationship between President Trump and the media had deteriorated.

The relationship with the media remained like this until the end of his presidency as also his last press conference on September 27, 2020, shows. For about 36 minutes, President Trump stood in the briefing room in front of reporters and spend almost half of the press conference on his opening statement. He frequently attacked the media for false reporting or unfair questioning and already did so during several passages of his opening statement.¹⁰⁴⁷

But it would be a tremendous thing for the mainstream medium – media to really start reporting. I think your ratings we [sic!] go through the roof, I really do, because people really are tired of this fake stuff.¹⁰⁴⁸

The president continued to criticize the media during the question-and-answer part. Overall, this press conference proceeded similarly to the former ones and was reflective of the status of the relationship between the president and critical media.¹⁰⁴⁹

¹⁰⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴⁴ “08/13/20: President Trump Holds a News Conference | Video,” 37:16–37:31.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Glenn Kessler et al., “In Four Years, President Trump Made 30,573 False or Misleading Claims.”

¹⁰⁴⁶ “08/13/20: President Trump Holds a News Conference | Video,” 37:22-37:26.

¹⁰⁴⁷ “09/27/20: President Trump Holds a News Conference,” *Trump White House Archived YouTube Channel*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OjwPZOiRvU> (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁴⁸ “The President's News Conference | September 27, 2020,” *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-1265> (accessed December 21, 2022).

¹⁰⁴⁹ The president was not asked one question on the pandemic during the press conference, yet as it reflected the status of the relationship, it was included in the analysis.

The year 2020 saw a major increase of solo press conferences held by Trump: The average of 3 solo press conferences per year rose to a total of 35 in 2020.¹⁰⁵⁰ Thus, the president had more contact with the White House press corps, which is normally appreciated by them. But the increased contact did not lead to better relations. Trump often attacked reporters on questions or called the media “fake news.” And he frequently circumvented the posed questions by using various tactics as simply ending the whole press conference when he became frustrated with follow-ups.

Moreover, his loose handling of facts proved to be problematic. Trump frequently lied during press conferences to make himself and his administration look better or his opponents worse. Confronted with this, he did not admit to any wrongdoing but often used his tactics of cutting off reporters while they were speaking or calling on the next reporter. Furthermore, the president frequently got into heated exchanges with correspondents, mostly due to questions or follow-up questions he did not like. He sometimes even became angry with correspondents before they had even asked the question.

President Trump used press conferences as a tool to get out information he wanted and to praise his administration’s work. Rather than actual interaction with the media, it seemed to be more of a show for his supporters and a mouthpiece to repeat topics and claims useful to him. This became particularly evident when the presidential election came closer, and the content of his opening statements and answers to questions deviated more and more towards election related issues.

His use of *Twitter* followed a similar strategy.

4.2 *Twitter* During the COVID-19 Pandemic

When Trump came into office, instead of using the official *Twitter* account of the President of the United States (@POTUS), he continued to primarily use his personal account @realDonaldTrump.¹⁰⁵¹ Though, as his direct predecessor, President Trump used *Twitter* as an information disseminating platform.¹⁰⁵²

¹⁰⁵⁰ Gerhard Peters, “Presidential News Conferences.”

¹⁰⁵¹ As Trump primarily used @realDonaldTrump, in the following, only the tweets from his personal account are analyzed. Even if it was Trump’s personal *Twitter* account, it cannot be ruled out that staff members also had the ability to send tweets through it. Since the tweets (whether directly from Trump or from staff) are considered as communication by the American president, they are treated the same in the following analysis.

¹⁰⁵² Trump’s tweets were selected with the help of the *Trump Twitter Archive*. Tweets were filtered by a date range set to the day Trump made his first tweet on the coronavirus until the end of his presidency. Retweets were excluded. All tweets of the set timeframe were screened manually, and tweets connected to the pandemic and to the media were singled out and categorized by their main characteristic. Dates and times of tweets were taken from the archive. It displays the time in Eastern Standard Time.

For instance, on March 1, 2020, Trump tweeted about preventative measures for flight travel:

Coronavirus: In addition to screening travelers ‘prior to boarding’ from certain designated high risk countries, or areas within those countries, they will also be screened when they arrive in America. Thank you! @VP @SecAzar @CDCgov @CDCDirector.¹⁰⁵³

And on July 17, 2020, Trump informed the public about an additional release of funds for the response to the pandemic:

In addition to nearly \$8 billion that Treasury provided tribal communities, @HUDgov is releasing an additional \$25 million in #CARESAct funding today to respond to the CoronaVirus with improved housing, indoor air quality, and food pantry support.¹⁰⁵⁴

Similar tweets were posted throughout his presidency. With them, the president informed the public on specific matters. Although they were often meant to be positive for his administration, the tweets themselves were phrased largely neutral. The president also sent out short tweets with – what one assumes – information on how people should behave during the pandemic. For instance, on March 14, Trump simply tweeted in capital letters:

SOCIAL DISTANCING!

or on April 8:

FLATTENING OF THE CURVE!¹⁰⁵⁵

However, these seemed to have only occurred in March and April 2020.

President Trump also shared his own coronavirus infection via *Twitter*. On October 2, at 12:54 a.m., Trump tweeted:

Tonight, @FLOTUS and I tested positive for COVID-19. We will begin our quarantine and recovery process immediately. We will get through this TOGETHER!¹⁰⁵⁶

The same day, the president was admitted to the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. While the move was communicated to be precautionary, it later became known that the president had been sicker than reported by the White House and – among other

¹⁰⁵³ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on March 01, 2020, 8:31 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁵⁴ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on July 17, 2020, 4:34 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁵⁵ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on March 14, 2020, 9:47 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022); Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on April 08, 2020, 11:26 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁵⁶ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on October 02, 2020, 12:54 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

issues – had had difficulties breathing.¹⁰⁵⁷ Yet, Trump kept up the pretense and tweeted at 11:31 p.m.:

Going well, I think! Thank you to all. LOVE!!!¹⁰⁵⁸

Although Trump kept tweeting throughout his time at the hospital, it was significantly less than usual, with only three tweets on October 2 and 3 each, and five on October 4. On October 5, when he left the hospital, he was back at 31 tweets.¹⁰⁵⁹ This drop in tweets might hint at his condition.

On October 4, Trump tweeted on his supporters waiting outside the hospital:

I really appreciate all of the fans and supporters outside of the hospital. The fact is, they really love our Country and are seeing how we are MAKING IT GREATER THAN EVER BEFORE!¹⁰⁶⁰

He would leave the hospital for a short trip in a SUV to wave to his supporters. This drew much criticism as he unnecessarily exposed the Secret Service agents driving the car to the virus. At least the president was masked up, and agents wore protective equipment. The media was angered that they had not been notified about this trip.¹⁰⁶¹ The next day, the president made reference towards the criticism in a tweet:

It is reported that the Media is upset because I got into a secure vehicle to say thank you to the many fans and supporters who were standing outside of the hospital for many hours, and even days, to pay their respect to their President. If I didn't do it, Media would say RUDE!!!¹⁰⁶²

He ignored the actual criticism and instead attacked the media for their unfairness, arguing that it did not matter what he did, the media always criticized him. Later, the president announced his return to the White House and told his followers not to fear the virus:

I will be leaving the great Walter Reed Medical Center today at 6:30 P.M. Feeling really good! Don't be afraid of Covid. Don't let it dominate your life. We have developed, under

¹⁰⁵⁷ Noah Weiland et al., “Trump Was Sicker Than Acknowledged with Covid-19,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/11/us/politics/trump-coronavirus.html> (accessed October 6, 2022).

¹⁰⁵⁸ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on October 02, 2020, 11:31 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁵⁹ *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022). Tweets counted on respective dates. Retweets excluded.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on October 04, 2020, 3:51 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁶¹ Barbara Sprunt, “Despite Risks to Others, Trump Leaves Hospital Suite to Greet Supporters,” *NPR*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/latest-updates-trump-covid-19-results/2020/10/04/920181116/in-brief-drive-by-trump-waves-to-supporters-outside-of-walter-reed> (accessed October 6, 2022).

¹⁰⁶² Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on October 05, 2020, 2:26 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

the Trump Administration, some really great drugs & knowledge. I feel better than I did 20 years ago!¹⁰⁶³

Considering how severely the virus affected him, the advice he gave to his supporters, stands in stark contrast to his own experience. In particular, when taking into account that Trump had access to likely one of the best treatments in the world, whereas his supporters did not have such medical care at hand.

Trump would not only inform the public about the virus and his own infection but also regularly about upcoming news conferences or press briefings via his *Twitter* account.¹⁰⁶⁴ Several of them also had the link to the livestream in them, making it very easy for the public to watch the president in action. The president also used his *Twitter* account to promote his own media appearances to the public. There were numerous tweets throughout the months as for instance on October 9:

Will be doing show with @RushLimbaughEIB at 12:00 P.M. TALK RADIO. ENJOY!!!¹⁰⁶⁵

Most of his announced media appearances were interviews with *Fox News* hosts, but there were some with other networks or media representatives as the indicated conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh. Although these tweets are not directly linked to the pandemic, they are worth noting. With these tweets, President Trump was able to directly reach the public to advertise his interviews. People then could tune into his interviews, and as they were mostly with *Fox News* hosts, the audience would hardly see critical questioning of the president. Thus, the public would hear Trump's message as he wished it to be. This was also a nice way around the mainstream media Trump disliked so much.

Yet, the information the president shared was not always factually correct or should have been shared by the chief executive. One well-known misinformation instance centered around the drug hydroxychloroquine. On March 21, 2020, Trump tweeted:

HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE & AZITHROMYCIN, taken together, have a real chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine.¹⁰⁶⁶

¹⁰⁶³ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on October 05, 2020, 2:37 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁶⁴ For example, on March 13, Trump tweeted: "I will be having a news conference today at 3:00 P.M., The White House. Topic: CoronaVirus!" and on August 8: "Major News Conference in Ten Minutes!" Tweets can be found under: Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on March 13, 2020, 10:55 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022), Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on August 08, 2020, 4:05 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed March 05, 2022),

¹⁰⁶⁵ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on October 09, 2020, 11:54 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022). Another example from March 4: "I will be interviewed by @seanhannity on @FoxNews at 9:10 P.M." Tweet can be found under: Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on March 04, 2020, 9:03 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁶⁶ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on March 21, 2020, 10:13 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

This tweet was made two days after the drug hydroxychloroquine first had come up during a press briefing. In this tweet, Trump further referred to a study that claimed positive effects of the drug. Shortly after, the study was redacted due to a lack in scientific standards. By the end of April, the FDA warned against the use of the drug. And a study published in May found that hydroxychloroquine had no effect against the coronavirus and in combination with an antibiotic (Azithromycin) was extremely harmful: the probability for cardiac arrest more than doubled in patients who received both drugs. Yet, the president kept promoting the drug over the next months. In mid-June, the FDA revoked the emergency use authorization for the drug and on July 1, published safety issues with the drug. Still, at the end of July, the president retweeted a video in which a doctor claimed that the drug would cure COVID-19.¹⁰⁶⁷

The hydroxychloroquine instance also represents a good example on how Trump steered the news media's reporting. Not only did correspondents question him on his retweet of the video during the press conference the following day (see VII.4.1), the media also extensively covered his outlandish claims with context-giving or fact-checking articles. A simple *Google* search on "Trump hydroxychloroquine," limited to the period from March 21 to the end of July 2020, showed many articles in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and other renowned media outlets dealing with Trump's statements on several pages of results.¹⁰⁶⁸ Moreover, a study found that after Trump tweeted and talked about unproven treatments like hydroxychloroquine, the "COVID-19 treatment coverage has been increasing on all networks."¹⁰⁶⁹

Yet, Trump not only used *Twitter* to inform his followers. He also used it to attack various opponents, including political opposition, celebrities, journalists, and the media in general. Trump would, for instance attack Democrats and accuse them of not focusing on pressing issues such as the pandemic, but only on issues that would make him look bad:

The Do Nothing Democrats were busy wasting time on the Immigration Hoax, & anything else they could do to make the Republican Party look bad, while I was busy calling early

¹⁰⁶⁷ Libby Cathey, "Timeline: Tracking Trump Alongside Scientific Developments on Hydroxychloroquine," *ABC News*, August 8, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/timeline-tracking-trump-alongside-scientific-developments-hydroxychloroquine/story?id=72170553> (accessed September 21, 2022).

¹⁰⁶⁸ *Google* search for the term "Trump hydroxychloroquine." Results were limited to pages in English and to the timeframe March 21, 2020, to July 31, 2020.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Kacper Niburski and Oskar Niburski, "Impact of Trump's Promotion of Unproven COVID-19 Treatments and Subsequent Internet Trends: Observational Study," *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22, no. 11 (November 2020), <https://www.jmir.org/2020/11/e20044/> (accessed February 1, 2023). Networks analyzed were *BBC News*, *CNN*, *C-SPAN*, *Fox News*, and *MSNBC*.

BORDER & FLIGHT closings, putting us way ahead in our battle with Coronavirus. Dems called it VERY wrong!¹⁰⁷⁰

He further argued that Democrats would use the pandemic to their advantage in the presidential election, trying to diminish his reelection chances:

The Democrats will open up their states on November 4th, the day after the Election. These shutdowns are ridiculous, and only being done to hurt the economy prior to the most important election, perhaps, in our history! #MAGA¹⁰⁷¹

But the president would also be more specific and go after certain individuals. One recurring attack was aimed at former President Obama and former Vice President and at that time presidential candidate Joe Biden and their handling of the H1N1 flu (commonly known as swine flu) outbreak in 2009/2010. The tweets are similar in tone and claim a bad response by the Obama administration to the H1N1 flu in contrast to an excellent job done by the Trump administration regarding the coronavirus. The following tweets exemplify these attacks.

Sleepy Joe Biden was in charge of the H1N1 Swine Flu epidemic which killed thousands of people. The response was one of the worst on record. Our response is one of the best, with fast action of border closings & a 78% Approval Rating, the highest on record. His was lowest!¹⁰⁷²

In August, he referred to the Obama Administration's response as "weak and pathetic" and argued that the media was biased and did not report on the truth about the Obama administration's response:

Looking back into history, the response by the ObamaBiden team to the H1N1 Swine Flu was considered a weak and pathetic one. Check out the polling, it's really bad. The big difference is that they got a free pass from the Corrupt Fake News Media!¹⁰⁷³

And frequently derived from his claims that presidential candidate Biden was not qualified to lead the U.S. through the coronavirus pandemic:

Joe Biden has no plan for Coronavirus - ALL TALK! He was a disaster in his handling of H1N1 Swine Flu. [...] If he were in charge, perhaps 2.2 million people would have died from this much more lethal disease!¹⁰⁷⁴

¹⁰⁷⁰ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on February 28, 2020, 12:43 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁷¹ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on September 08, 2020, 8:43 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁷² Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on March 12, 2020, 10:20 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁷³ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on August 18, 2020, 7:10 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁷⁴ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on October 08, 2020, 2:59 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

The general claim by President Trump that the former administration's response to the H1N1 outbreak was "one of the worst on record" or "weak and pathetic" does not correspond with the assessment of experts. An article on the Obama administration's response states "that while luck played a part, a series of rapid but conservative decisions by federal officials worked out better than many had dared hope." One expert evaluated the response as "at least a B-plus," another even as "excellent." However, the article in *The New York Times* also stated that luck was involved as medications worked well and the virus did not turn out to be as lethal. Moreover, the vaccine was available quickly and one small dosage was sufficient to protect people.¹⁰⁷⁵ Yet, through his *Twitter* account Trump had an outlet where he could spread claims that were at least tilted in his advantage and promote his administration's response, with his supporters hardly questioning his statements.

President Trump would not only attack his predecessor and the former vice president for their handling of the H1N1 outbreak. He also went after Biden for anything connected to the election, as the latter was now running against him. On July 6, Trump wrote:

Corrupt Joe Biden and the Democrats don't want to open schools in the Fall for political reasons, not for health reasons! They think it will help them in November. Wrong, the people get it!¹⁰⁷⁶

And a couple of days before the presidential election in November 2020, he claimed:

This election is a choice between a Trump Super Boom or a Biden Depression, and it's between a safe vaccine or a devastating Biden lockdown! <https://t.co/FkOHZ0XUS2>
<https://t.co/IEPULUXAXe>¹⁰⁷⁷

Here again, Trump focused on making himself and his administration look good and presented himself as the only reasonable choice for Americans, and Biden and the Democratic party as a bad one.

The media was another very frequent topic in President Trump's tweets. There are two main types that can be distinguished: Tweets disapproving and tweets approving of the media and their reporting. In the latter case, President Trump frequently tweeted quotes he saw on shows and liked. For instance:

¹⁰⁷⁵ Donald McNeil Jr., "U.S. Reaction to Swine Flu: Apt and Lucky," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/02/health/02flu.html> (accessed October 7, 2022).

¹⁰⁷⁶ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on July 06, 2020, 4:11 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁷⁷ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on October 30, 2020, 5:47 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

‘President Trump’s decision to very early on restrict travel from China saved tens of thousands of lives.’ @LouDobbs @FoxBusiness.¹⁰⁷⁸

Or

‘His (President Trump’s) policies set a foundation that allowed us to survive the pandemic.’ @HeyTammyBruce @SteveHiltonx @FoxNews True, we built something so strong that we are now setting economic growth records again - Jobs & Growth!!!¹⁰⁷⁹

He even occasionally tweeted quotes from media outlets he usually called fake news when he liked what they said or parts of their coverage:

‘President Trump is a ratings hit. Since reviving the daily White House briefing Mr. Trump and his coronavirus updates have attracted an average audience of 8.5 million on cable news, roughly the viewership of the season finale of ‘The Bachelor.’ Numbers are continuing to rise... ..On Monday, nearly 12.2 million people watched Mr. Trump’s briefing on CNN, Fox News and MSNBC, according to Nielsen — ‘Monday Night Football’ numbers. Millions more are watching on ABC, CBS, NBC and online streaming sites, and the audience is expanding. On Monday, Fox News... ..alone attracted 6.2 million viewers for the president’s briefing – an astounding number for a 6 p.m. cable broadcast, more akin to the viewership for a popular prime-time sitcom.... ..The CBS News poll said 13 percent of Republicans trusted the news media for information about the virus.’ Michael M. Grynbaum @NYTimes.¹⁰⁸⁰

It must be mentioned that the tweets do not reflect the content of the article. In fact, the article is highly critical of Trump and among other issues voices concern about the misinformation coming from the president and the White House in the press conferences and briefings that many people were watching.¹⁰⁸¹ As stated before, the truthfulness of these statements seemed to not have been a significant aspect in the president’s final decision to share these statements on *Twitter*.

Trump not only highlighted certain statements, but also promoted whole networks or shows. In May 2020 Trump tweeted:

¹⁰⁷⁸ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on March 25, 2020, 6:14 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁷⁹ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on June 22, 2020, 12:14 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁸⁰ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on March 29, 2020, 1:48:36 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022); Donald J. Trump, “Tweets on March 29, 2020, 1:48:37 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022); Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on March 29, 2020, 1:49 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022). Since tweets have a character limit, Trump indicated with dots that they were linked to other tweets.

¹⁰⁸¹ Michael M. Grynbaum, “Trump’s Coronavirus Briefings Are a Ratings Hit. Should Networks Cover Them?,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/business/media/trump-coronavirus-briefings-ratings.html> (accessed October 28, 2022).

I hate to be promoting AT&T, but @OANN is Great News, not Fake News. Everybody should be carrying them! <https://t.co/b2fx9w0zqq>.¹⁰⁸²

He also congratulated other networks on their shows or coverage, if he appreciated it, even if it was CNN:

Very appreciative that @CNN covered the vast majority of the Republican Convention last night. That was really good for CNN, while at the same time being good for our Country. Thank you!¹⁰⁸³

Both the tweet about *The New York Times* article and this one show that Trump was solely concerned with the coverage and less about the media outlet that carried it. It was only about the fact that the coverage was positive. Because *The New York Times* or *CNN* rarely reported positively on him, they were more often attacked than praised.

Not connected to the pandemic, but very telling are the book promotions the president would do via his *Twitter* account for certain journalists he liked. In August 2020, the president congratulated *Fox News* host Sean Hannity:

Very excited to see @SeanHannity's long awaited new book, 'Live Free or Die: America (and the World) on the Brink' which will be released on Tuesday, August 4th. Sean is a Great American Patriot. Make sure to get your copy today! <https://t.co/XNci6lJ96v>.¹⁰⁸⁴

And later during the year, he did so as well for *Fox News* host Jeanine Pirro:

Congratulations to @JudgeJeanine on the release of her new book, 'DON'T LIE TO ME' which is now available. Get your copy today! <https://t.co/ObHQ9b4ymu>.¹⁰⁸⁵

It may appear ethically troubling when the President of the United States promotes political books written by journalists. Richard Painter, who was George W. Bush's Chief White House ethics lawyer, called such promotion "legal but tacky."¹⁰⁸⁶

Yet, the majority of tweets on the media were negative. The *Trump Twitter Archive* includes 872 tweets for the search term "fake news" during the Trump's time in office.¹⁰⁸⁷

Many tweets were addressed at the media in general, where the president frequently

¹⁰⁸² Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on May 02, 2020, 4:49 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹⁰⁸³ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on August 25, 2020, 8:29 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹⁰⁸⁴ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on August 01, 2020, 4:22 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹⁰⁸⁵ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on September 22, 2020, 6:42 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹⁰⁸⁶ Quoted in Maxwell Tani, "Donald Trump Uses His Twitter to Promote Books by Conservative Pundits," *Insider*, September 2, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-uses-his-twitter-to-promote-books-by-conservative-pundits-2017-8> (accessed February 1, 2023).

¹⁰⁸⁷ *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 16, 2022). Search with filter limiting results to Trump's time in office and the search term "fake news." Retweets excluded.

criticized the reporting of the media on his and his administration's handling of the pandemic. For example, in April, Trump tweeted:

There has never been, in the history of our Country, a more vicious or hostile Lamestream Media than there is right now, even in the midst of a National Emergency, the Invisible Enemy!¹⁰⁸⁸

Or in July:

You will never hear this on the Fake News concerning the China Virus, but by comparison to most other countries, who are suffering greatly, we are doing very well - and we have done things that few other countries could have done!¹⁰⁸⁹

In connection with these claims, the president also frequently tweeted on the number of cases and testing and how the media in his opinion used the numbers to make the situation look worse than it actually was. At the end of June 2020 Trump wrote:

The number of ChinaVirus cases goes up, because of GREAT TESTING, while the number of deaths (mortality rate), goes way down. The Fake News doesn't like telling you that!¹⁰⁹⁰

The following month he tweeted:

In a certain way, our tremendous Testing success gives the Fake News Media all they want, CASES. In the meantime, Deaths and the all important Mortality Rate goes down. You don't hear about that from the Fake News, and you never will. Anybody need any Ventilators???¹⁰⁹¹

And in mid-August:

More Testing, which is a good thing (we have the most in the world), equals more Cases, which is Fake News Gold. They use Cases to demean the incredible job being done by the great men & women of the U.S. fighting the China Plague!¹⁰⁹²

Trump was not wrong when he wrote about case and death numbers. Yet, he still largely misrepresented the situation by only using certain data at certain times. Furthermore, a very important measurement was missing from the tweets: the test positivity rate, which is the ratio of tests with positive results to total tests taken, given as a percentage. A high

¹⁰⁸⁸ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on April 27, 2020, 9:41 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹⁰⁸⁹ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on July 21, 2020, 6:39 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹⁰⁹⁰ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on June 25, 2020, 12:06 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹⁰⁹¹ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on July 04, 2020, 2:49 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹⁰⁹² Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on August 11, 2020, 8:33 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

percentage indicates a fast-spreading virus and high infection rates.¹⁰⁹³ Only a combination of data allows to draw conclusions on how the pandemic developed and helps clarify whether the rising cases were due to more testing or due to a higher number of infections. During the times of the first two tweets the test positivity rate was increasing, which indicated that rising cases were due to a spreading virus.¹⁰⁹⁴ This contradicts Trump's claim of rising cases being solely due to increased testing. The president often chose to interpret data or reporting to his advantage, which does not necessarily fully or accurately reflect the situation or the reporting.

In his tweet in August, Trump focused on his claim of more testing leading to a higher case number. This time the president left out the numbers of deaths. Typically, when more people get COVID-19, the number of deaths will go up with a temporal offset as it takes some time from the point of confirmed infection to the death of patients.¹⁰⁹⁵ This is exactly what had happened when the number of deaths rose shortly after the second tweet in July until his tweet in August. However, numbers of deaths would start to decrease, and case numbers and test positivity rate had fallen, indicating a slower spread of the virus. Overall, the situation had improved.¹⁰⁹⁶ But still, when looking at the data, Trump's claim of the rising cases coming simply from more testing was wrong.

However, President Trump also argued that the media intentionally reported negatively about the status and his handling of the pandemic by focusing on case numbers only or not reporting on how well the U.S. and the Trump administration was handling the pandemic, also in contrast to other countries. Instead of intentional misinformation, the lack of positive media coverage for Trump's handling of the pandemic can more likely be attributed to the fact that Trump's claims were not based on factual information. There are several studies that show that the U.S. was hit extremely hard by the pandemic due to

¹⁰⁹³ David Dowdy and Gypsyamber D'Souza, "COVID-19 Testing: Understanding the 'Percent Positive'," *John Hopkins University*, August 10, 2020, <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2020/covid-19-testing-understanding-the-percent-positive> (accessed October 17, 2022).. For more detailed information on the test positive rate refer to Dowdy and D'Souza.

¹⁰⁹⁴ "Covid in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Counts."

¹⁰⁹⁵ Philip Bump, "The More Data We Get, the More Obviously Wrong Trump's 'It's Just Because of Testing' Becomes: More Deaths Isn't a Function of More Tests," *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/08/more-data-we-get-more-obviously-wrong-trumps-its-just-because-testing-becomes/> (accessed October 13, 2022).

¹⁰⁹⁶ "Covid in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Counts." Deaths had risen strongly from July 6 until the beginning of August. Deaths then slightly fell for about a week, just to rise until mid-August.

mismanagement by the Trump administration.¹⁰⁹⁷ This fact was stressed by the media who also not only reported other important data as number of deaths or test positivity rate but also actively pushed back on Trump's case coverage claims.¹⁰⁹⁸ Therefore, the claim that all of those considered "fake news" media by Trump would intentionally only focus on rising case numbers to make the pandemic look worse than it was, is not verified by their actual reporting.

Yet, it must be acknowledged that coloring of the news does exist, and Trump's management of the pandemic was reported differently by media outlets depending on their political alignments. At the same time there is evidence that President Trump and *Fox News* on a large scale co-produced misinformation on the pandemic and spread it to the public.¹⁰⁹⁹ Thus, it can be argued that it was not the most important issue for President Trump to spread the truth – although he now claims so on his own social network where posts are called "truths" – but present himself and his administration in the best light, countering negative media reporting with accusations of intentionally wrong reporting or claims as "fake news." And this was something he continued to do, and most of his supporters would believe him.

There were also tweets where President Trump did not in general criticize the media but singled out specific media outlets. The president criticized liberal media as *The New York Times* or *CNN*:

Advertising in the Failing New York Times is WAY down. Washington Post is not much better. I can't say whether this is because they are Fake News sources of information, to a level that few can understand, or the Virus is just plain beating them up. Fake News is bad for America!¹¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁹⁷ Exemplary studies: Daniel M. Gerstein, "Assessing the US Government Response to the Coronavirus," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 76, no. 4 (2020), 166–74; Jeffrey Willis, "The Public Health Response of the US Federal Government to the Coronavirus Crisis and the Narrative of Donald J. Trump," in *COVID-19 and Social Protection: A Study in Human Resilience and Social Solidarity*, ed. Steven Ratuva et al., 231–59 (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

¹⁰⁹⁸ Exemplary articles: Charles Ornstein and Ash Ngu, "No, President Trump, Testing Is Not Causing Case Counts to Rise. The Virus Is Just Spreading Faster," *ProPublica*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.propublica.org/article/state-coronavirus-data-doesnt-support-trumps-misleading-testing-claims> (accessed October 18, 2022); Philip Bump, "The More Data We Get, the More Obviously Wrong Trump's 'It's Just Because of Testing' Becomes"; Cameron Peters, "Trump Keeps on Holding Rallies Even as COVID-19 Cases Surge: 'Pixie Dust and Pseudoscience' in the Trump White House," *Vox*, October 18, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/10/18/21521834/trump-holds-rallies-coronavirus-covid-19-cases-surge-michigan-wisconsin> (accessed October 18, 2022).

¹⁰⁹⁹ Yunkang Yang and Lance W. Bennett, "Interactive Propaganda: How Fox News and Donald Trump Co-Produced False Narratives About the COVID-19 Crisis," in *Political Communication in the Time of Coronavirus*, ed. Peter Van Aelst and Jay G. Blumler, 83–100 (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 84, 97.

¹¹⁰⁰ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on April 06, 2020, 9:08 A.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

Or

MSDNC and FAKE NEWS CNN are going wild trying to protect China!¹¹⁰¹

Yet, he did not refrain from attacking right-leaning media when he was unhappy about their coverage. The most prominent example was *Fox News*:

@FoxNews is no longer the same. We miss the great Roger Ailes. You have more anti-Trump people, by far, than ever before. Looking for a new outlet!
<https://t.co/jXxsF0flUM>¹¹⁰²

At times, Trump was more specific and pointed out certain people he disliked on the channel:

Chris Wallace of @FoxNews, by far the lowest rated of the Sunday morning news programs, [...] His show is a total ‘hit job’ on your favorite President, me!¹¹⁰³

These tweets show that Trump was very sensitive to *Fox News* not reporting positively on him. In another tweet, Trump even punished the channel for not being fully loyal to him, arguing that they did not help his reelection by being critical of him:

They totally forgot who got them where they are!¹¹⁰⁴

It is very insightful in Trump’s view of the relationship with *Fox News*. He thought they had to fully support him without being critical since – in his view – he made them popular and was responsible for their high ratings (which in part he was). Therefore, they had to “pay him back” by being loyal.

As Trump was dissatisfied with *Fox News*, the president also gave suggestions to his followers on other options to watch that were more in line with his views.¹¹⁰⁵ Even after the 2020 election, he would recommend other channels as, in his opinion, the channel interviewed too many democratic politicians:

¹¹⁰¹ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on May 04, 2020, 6:35 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022). *MSDNC* is a nickname for *MSNBC* used by people who believe that *MSNBC* is the extended arm of the DNC (Democratic National Committee). The name combining *MSNBC* and DNC in one word.

¹¹⁰² Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on May 18, 2020, 9:59 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022). Trump referred to the former CEO of *Fox News* Roger Ailes who through the cable network strongly influenced, even forged modern conservatism. The attached link leads to a deleted account, thus it is unclear what the president shared.

¹¹⁰³ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on November 01, 2020, 2:20 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹¹⁰⁴ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on July 29, 2020, 12:58 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹¹⁰⁵ For example, in August Trump tweeted: “.@FoxNews is not watchable during weekend afternoons. It is worse than Fake News @CNN. I strongly suggest turning your dial to @OANN. They do a really ‘Fair & Balanced’ job!” Tweet can be found under: Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on August 16, 2020, 1:31 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022)

@FoxNews daytime is virtually unwatchable, especially during the weekends. Watch @OANN, @newsmax, or almost anything else. You won't have to suffer through endless interviews with Democrats, and even worse!¹¹⁰⁶

This shows that President Trump would not accept any negative representation of him or his administration, no matter where it originated and would reward frequent positive coverage of him and his administration with praise. It is reflective of how Trump only saw the world through a lens of what was beneficial to him. Besides the fact that in the U.S. the First Amendment protects the media from being required to unconditionally support the president, for the Head of State to have such a view is highly problematic. The president's job is to make decision that are beneficial for the country and the American people. These decisions might vary based on whether his viewpoint is left- or right-leaning, however they should never be solely made for his personal gain or reputation.

Twitter was an easy way for President Trump to get his personal viewpoint and opinion, be it factually justified or not, to his followers, without a direct follow-up by the media. The president would use this medium for various informative posts, as for instance promotion of his own media appearances. Frequently, these posts were questionable in their truthfulness and showed that the president and White House did put their own benefit above factual accuracy. Although Trump at times voiced his appraisal through the medium, the negative or aggressive tone towards everyone who criticized Trump, or his administration stood out. Moreover, he often used capitalization (seen as the written equivalent to shouting) and exclamation marks, amplifying the hostility and frequently attacked perceived adversaries like Democratic politicians or the media. In this context, the many negative adjectives that Trump used are also striking: *Sleepy* Joe Biden, *lowest* rated, *Lamestream* Media, or he *Failing* New York Times. With this description, he increased the devaluation of the people or institutions he attacked, and often these adjectives became part of the "nicknames" that Trump assigned.

Especially noticeable was the stark contrasting of his own actions versus the ones of his opponents. Trump would also frequently combine certain themes:

¹¹⁰⁶ Donald J. Trump, "Tweet on November 28, 2020, 2:48 P.M. EST," *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

No matter what you do for the Do Nothing Democrats, no matter how GREAT a job you are doing, they will only respond to their Fake partners in the Lamestream Media in the negative, even in a time of crisis. I thought it would be different, but it's not. In fact, it's even worse.¹¹⁰⁷

Or

The Radical Left Lamestream Media, together with their partner, the Do Nothing Democrats, are trying to spread a new narrative that President Trump was slow in reacting to Covid 19. Wrong, I was very fast, even doing the Ban on China long before anybody thought necessary!¹¹⁰⁸

He made it look like the Democrats and the media actively worked together and colluded against him. Such alleged collusions were a reoccurring theme in various combinations of opponents, where Trump argued that there was a grand conspiracy against him and his administration with the intention to make them look bad. This fits with how President Trump presented himself in other venues and is as well reflective of how the rest of the administration handled themselves and criticism in general.

What also becomes obvious through the above analysis is that President Trump would – as during other events – frequently use his signature derogatory nicknames on *Twitter* in connection to the pandemic. They were intended to reflect the character or main thing that was represented by the nickname. Most famous are for instance “fake news” or “fake news media,” which do not report the facts on his achievements on the pandemic and would never tell the truth about the president and his administration. In connection with his “fake news” allegations, he also accused the media of making up their sources to write lies about him and called for forcing the media to reveal their sources.¹¹⁰⁹

While there are many supporters rooting for the president in answers to his tweets, there are also many negative replies with users disagreeing, fact checking or insulting. This is not unusual on social media and thus not unique to Trump's *Twitter* feed.

As already alluded to, President Trump's *Twitter* use was characterized through repetitive display of certain themes. Through such rigid reiteration he managed to engrave disparaging nicknames, collusion allegations or more testing causing rising coronavirus

¹¹⁰⁷ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on April 18, 2020, 1:20 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹¹⁰⁸ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on May 27, 2020, 9:19 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹¹⁰⁹ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on March 28, 2020, 8:13 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022); Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on March 28, 2020, 8:33 A.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022); Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on April 18, 2020, 2:22 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022). Nicknames were not limited to the media. “Do Nothing Democrats,” who are lazy and do not help the country versus President Trump who fought the virus or “Sleepy Joe Biden,” who was not fit for office.

cases in the collective memory. One might not agree with his stance but still knows who the “lamestream media” are or that in his view he excellently handled the pandemic.

The functions *Twitter* provided Trump with were also used by the president for his pandemic communication. He bypassed the media with his tweets and informed his followers of his viewpoints on issues as rising cases, his handling of the pandemic and the media who would not report his successes (first function). The second function connects directly at this point. As the media reported about his (most outrageous) tweets (e.g., Trump’s promotion of Hydroxychloroquine), the president managed to set the news media’s agenda for the day or even several days. This in turn would lead to people who did not follow Trump on *Twitter* or were not even *Twitter* users, to be informed about his tweets, thus enlarging the reach of the president’s messages to audiences he would normally not be able to reach through his *Twitter* account. It was also a convenient way to divert attention from issues Trump did not want in the news.

With his predominant use of his personal account, and not the official @POTUS account, as well as his informal language, his tweets got a more personal and less official touch. Consequently, the aggressive tone and insults had a more personal feeling to them. However, even more important, followers experienced a more personal exchange with the president. This made Trump’s statements on *Twitter* official (as he was the President) but also very personal, which in turn made him look more approachable to his supporters.

In the end, his frequent loose handling of facts and aggressive tone on *Twitter* led to a conflict with the company. *Twitter* in May 2020 began to put warning labels on or fact-check problematic tweets by Trump.¹¹¹⁰ This approach by *Twitter* annoyed the president and he argued that this amounted to suppression of information by the social media companies.¹¹¹¹ It was only after the attack on the Capitol that *Twitter* suspended the president’s account on January 8, 2021, with the reasoning that tweets he had sent out that day “are likely to inspire others to replicate the violent acts that took place on January 6, 2021.”¹¹¹² The suspension was effective until the new owner of *Twitter*, Elon Musk, lifted

¹¹¹⁰ “Twitter ‘Permanently Suspends ’Trump’s Account,” *BBC News*, January 9, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55597840> (accessed October 19, 2022).

¹¹¹¹ Donald J. Trump, “Tweet on October 28, 2020, 12:33 P.M. EST,” *Trump Twitter Archive* (accessed December 23, 2022).

¹¹¹² “Permanent Suspension of @realDonaldTrump,” *Twitter*, January 8, 2020, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension (accessed October 19, 2022) Further *Twitter* accounts (of Trump’s campaign or of people who had posted on behalf of the president) and other social media accounts of Trump were also suspended. *Meta*, the parent company of *Facebook* and *Instagram* has also reinstated Trump’s accounts.

it in November 2022. Yet, so far, Trump has not used his *Twitter* account and stayed on his own newly created social network *Truth Social*.¹¹¹³

The analysis showed that Trump's communication with most parts of the media was characterized by open tensions. The president's attitude to the "mainstream" media was evident during his press conferences and on *Twitter*. It was normal for Trump to attack reporters or call the media "fake news," either when directly talking to them or via his *Twitter* account.

Moreover, Trump's loose attitude towards facts and truth were problematic. The president frequently lied during press conferences or on *Twitter* to make himself and his administration look good and his opponents bad. As he was accused of promoting and indirectly inciting violence, which led to supporters storming the Capitol to overturn the presidential election, social media platforms suspended his accounts.

Yet, what also became evident was that correspondents were quite helpless if the president decided to not answer questions, answer questions the way he wanted to answer them, cut off reporters, or did not believe in facts. Over the course of Trump's presidency, the media did not find a way to manage Trump's untruths or getting factually correct information from the president. This was largely helped by the polarized politics and media, where Republican politicians and conservative media hardly criticized the president but united behind him. By doing so they legitimized his statements and behavior, which in return made it nearly impossible for the political opposition and non-conservative media to convince the president's supporters of facts. This will remain a challenging development for the future.

Overall, Trump was not interested in good relations with the media, but solely in the positive marketing of his presidency and himself as a person. This was reflected in his communication. He would not answer questions that he did not like, challenged his standpoint, or addressed his factually incorrect statement. He rather stuck to insulting the questioner or promoted false claims. Simultaneously, he propagated and repeated the same themes through his *Twitter* channel, engraining them in the public's memory. The statement to Leslie Stahl about his tactic to discredit the media revealed his strategic attitude towards degrading the media and his ability to drive news coverage also speaks

¹¹¹³ Shannon Bond, "Elon Musk Allows Donald Trump Back on Twitter," *NPR*, November 20, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/19/1131351535/elon-musk-allows-donald-trump-back-on-twitter> (accessed December 16, 2022).

for an active strategic approach. However, his anger and aggressiveness were likely also fueled by an already existing personal aversion towards the media.

With the focus on his personal *Twitter* account, he not only made the official @POTUS account less important but also all other official White House social media channels. As they played a minor role, cross-channel communication was not the main communications strategy. The analysis showed that the communication focus was on the person Donald Trump who would spread the same messages wherever he went. Thus, consistent messaging on specific themes was not the result of an active cross-channel communication strategy but came from an extreme focus on Donald Trump, and in a way a “one-man show.”

VIII. Comparison

Presidential media communication is a fundamental aspect of democratic governance. For this reason, it is inevitable for a president to interact with the media in some capacity. There are long-standing institutionalized forums for interaction between the media and the president such as press conferences or short question-and-answer sessions. The interactions during these forums can vary greatly from presidency to presidency and are influenced by many factors. One major factor is the president's general attitude towards the media. It serves as the foundation for the relationship and greatly influences it.

In principle, Kennedy liked interacting with the media. He had briefly worked as a journalist before his political career began, and he was quite successful in using his experience to his advantage. Kennedy was a master of managing the news media and therefore had in general very good relations with them. He perceived journalists as "friends" and his interactions with reporters were characterized by politeness. It certainly helped that Kennedy was charismatic and had a good sense of humor, which frequently surfaced in the interactions. He often used it to diffuse difficult situations or to be more likeable by directing the humor at himself. The importance Kennedy ascribed to humor can be seen in the active collection of anecdotes in a "humor folder" to use in speeches. In return, he got a respectful and cooperative relationship.

Nixon stands in stark contrast to Kennedy. He had generally bad relations with the media. The two main reasons were: First, Nixon was extremely thin-skinned, took criticism personally, and could harbor grudges extensively. He had paranoid traits believing that everyone was out to get him, including the media. Consequentially, he distrusted the media by default. Second, he saw politics as a ruthless game in which rules are broken constantly and therefore everything is allowed. This combination did not provide a good basis for solid media relations, and it showed in his relationship. Ultimately, it significantly contributed to his eventual resignation. Yet even though there was strain to the relationship, the public interactions between the two sides stayed mostly polite, respectful, and calm. While Nixon did not like the media, he was at the same time aware of the importance of positive media coverage. As he did not trust reporters, he professionally managed his interactions with the help of the newly created White House Office of Communications. Through that he institutionalized communications with the media and pioneered a media management approach that influenced all subsequent presidents. Yet, Nixon also influenced the media as he largely contributed to the skepticism of journalists towards the

president's truthfulness. Through the frequent lies that would later be revealed, Nixon made the media more mistrustful towards presidential statements and claims.

Obama had gained some editorial experience in academia, but he was unable to transfer it to his media relations. Although his public media interactions were characterized by respectful exchanges, he did not have a particularly good relationship with the media in general and the White House press corps in particular. But he was not driven by paranoia and hostility. The Obama White House struggled with the incompatibility of communicating the decision-making process to the press while at the same time controlling the message. Although Obama did recognize the role of the media in a democracy, he had a general unease with journalists. It was rooted in his short national political career, where he had hardly time to form long-term relationships with the Washington media and the trust that comes with it. Furthermore, the media environment had changed significantly since Kennedy's and Nixon's presidencies: Obama faced a much more polarized media where the extremes were even less committed to objective reporting like part of the right-wing media affirming birtherism even though it had already been disproven. Obama's media relation was further complicated by his dislike of the speed and breathlessness of the 24/7 news cycle with its immediate reporting. Obama felt that his interactions with reporters were all about creating the next headline by catching him misspeaking or misbehaving rather than by having a substantive exchange. Thus, his difficult relationship with the media was based on a discrepancy between how he felt the media should execute their role and how the media themselves did execute their role.

When looking at the above three presidents it is noticeable that in public their interactions with the media stayed polite, at least for most of the time. Not so with Trump. Through his focus on his own interest and his emotional and at times insulting communications, his relationship with the media was extremely poor. In fact, it was openly hostile. A negative and aggressive tone overrode nearly all interactions with the media that reported critically about him. Only fully loyal media that did not voice criticism were accepted as being "objective." Nevertheless, much of the mainstream media did report critically about the frequent and outright lies of Trump and his administration. These critical reports fueled Trump's war with the media, which was accompanied by frequent insults and attacks on them.

Overall, Kennedy had comparatively the best media relations. Obama's relationship was strongly strained. Nixon's was characterized by paranoia and the assumption that everyone

was out to get him personally. Trump's relations were worse than those of any of the other three presidents. He never missed an opportunity to show his hostility in public.

With Kennedy, Nixon and Obama, the status of their relationship with the media could also be seen in their accessibility. Kennedy saw accessibility to the media as a way to achieve more positive coverage. Therefore, he ensured that he stayed as accessible to the media as possible. Moreover, he was mindful of the media's needs and understood their workings. He used this knowledge to facilitate their jobs, not only as president but already in his prior political career. For example, Kennedy provided the correspondents with transcripts of his speeches on the campaign trail of the 1960s presidential election. This allowed them to focus and to listen to Kennedy's words instead of having to simultaneously listen to and take notes during his speeches. By that he had already created a cooperative relationship before he became president. During his presidency, he was then able to build on these solid relations.

As a result of his negative attitude, Nixon made himself much less accessible than Kennedy. He was also more indifferent to their work processes. In contrast to Kennedy, Nixon's campaign deliberately made the media's work more difficult by not providing them with transcripts of his speeches as the Kennedy campaign had done. His lower accessibility also showed during his time as president, where he held significantly fewer press conferences, causing the correspondents to voice complaints about their access to the president.

Due to his unease with the media, Obama was less available to the press and thus had fewer exchanges with journalists. Moreover, the general information flow from the Obama White House to the media was actively limited through the employment of legal measures. Reporters further argued that they did not really know the president at all or were unaware of how decisions were made and had to strongly rely on external sources. Instead of getting their messages out through the media, the Obama White House preferred to use social media for spreading information. This lower accessibility then in turn had a negative impact on Obama's media relationship.

In contrast to the former three, Trump's media relations do not allow direct conclusions about his accessibility as the access to him depended on the interaction forum. Since Trump had an aversion towards critical questions and towards most of the represented media outlets, the president generally did not like the setting of a press conference. Before the pandemic, this was reflected in the extreme low frequency of his press conferences. The change after the outbreak of the coronavirus, mainly attests to the urgency of the situation,

not a change in his attitude towards press conferences. Trump preferred venues where he could pick the media or had more power over the questions asked – as in interviews or during his “chopper talk,” – and would there be available to the press on his own terms. While all presidents were accessible to reporters to varying degrees and had different attitudes toward the media, they all, in some shape or form wanted to or did restrict the freedom of the press. Although Kennedy acknowledged the importance of a free press and had good media relations, he was not always pleased with the media coverage he received. Even though this seldomly showed in public, he would not hesitate to tell journalists about his displeasure in private. Here, he benefited from his good communication skills, which contributed decisively to Kennedy’s good relations with the media. Indeed, Kennedy was also able to argue with the media without permanently damaging the relationship. This became very visible after the speech before the *American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA)* in April 1961, where Kennedy caused furor among the members of the media, when he implicated them in the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Although he had been angry with the media and voiced his criticism, he realized his mistake to publicly criticize them and was able to restore the damage and get back their cooperation. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, he changed his approach and tried to keep information from the journalists. The media here even helped the president by following his request not to publish information until his address, in a way restricting their own freedom. Although interactions in public in general stayed polite, Nixon frequently had disputes with journalists over their reporting. Fitting to Nixon’s attitude towards the media were the two main elements of his media strategy. One, circumvent the media and go directly to the people and, two, go after them publicly with words and privately with actions. Nixon repeatedly used the term the “media” in favor of the at the time more common term the “press.” It made the fourth estate appear as a larger and more undefined group and thus sounded more threatening. Moreover, he sent out his vice president to attack the press as biased elites and the clearer the White House’s involvement in Watergate scandal became, the more openly he criticized the journalists’ questioning and focus on Watergate in their reporting while he interacted with them at his press conferences. This aligns with his general media relationship deteriorating with the progression of Watergate. In private, Nixon was at constant “war” with the media, calling the press his “enemy.” The terms well describe his view on the relationship and reflect the secret attacks he and his administration carried out on them. Not only did the White House keep lists of friends and enemies in the press, but it also targeted the enemies through government institutions such as the IRS or

threatened to challenge TV licenses. White House operatives even thought about assassinating a journalist. Overall, attacks on the media achieved an unprecedented level during Nixon's time in the White House. Many of his actions against them were at least an attempt to limit the freedom of the press and consequently resulted in bad relations. For all these reasons Nixon is said to have established "press bashing" and by that the delegitimization of the media as a political strategy.

Obama's tense media relationship was complicated by a conflict over information sharing. The Obama White House in general was inaccessible to the media and refused to provide basic facts on the issues it did not want in the news. Moreover, despite his promise at the beginning of his presidency to increase transparency, the White House frequently used FOIA to keep information secret. However, a large percentage of the denials were declared wrong after being challenged and the White House had to release the information. In addition, during Obama's time in office, the prosecution of leakers increased sharply, and journalists using leaked information had to fear legal actions against them as well. This attitude by the Obama White House further heavily strained the media relations. The limitation of transparency and information flow represents a clear restriction of the freedom of the press.

Trump threatened to challenge licenses and tighten libel laws. Although these were empty threats, they showed his attitude towards critical reporting. Moreover, the White House published what they called "alternative facts" if they did not like the truth. Publicly, Trump even called the media "the enemy of the American people" several times. Furthermore, he frequently denounced them as biased and devalued their reporting by calling critical media "fake news." This attitude towards critical outlets is explained by Trump not having any interest in good relations with the media that criticized him, it was rather the opposite. His focus lay on the positive marketing of himself and his presidency, and it was more about demonstrating leadership than implementing policies. Since he refuted criticism of himself and of his administration there were frequent clashes with the press.

And this is where his different approach to restrict the media's work comes into play. To be able to cast doubt on their objectivity and impartiality, Trump needed to strategically disparage critical reporting. By attacking the truthfulness of the media's reporting, Trump was able to ensure that critical reports, though they were factually correct, were seen as untrustworthy and intentionally false and thus not believed by his supporters. The attacks were therefore not only caused by frustration over perceived inaccurate reporting but were done for political gain. Many supporters were unaware of the fact that this was an active

strategy by Trump. Through this strategy Trump restricted the power of the media's reporting by attacking its credibility.

While Kennedy, and even more so Obama, focused on withholding information from the media, Nixon and especially Trump targeted the credibility of the media. But all these approaches had an impact on press freedom in direct or indirect ways.

As press conferences are a forum where the president and the media interact directly, the way presidents shape them are typically reflective of their media relationship. The atmosphere at the press conference corresponded to Kennedy's generally good media relationship and his understanding of the media. The press corps and president interacted in a calm, civil and polite manner, also in times of crisis. Although there had been some opposition to his decision to live televise the conferences by the media, they were soon convinced of the change and flocked to the attractive forum.

The press conferences during Nixon's time in office proceeded very similar, as the interactions were typically civil and calm. Nixon in general did well during the conferences. He mostly remained calm and polite but was not as charismatic as Kennedy. His privately expressed distrust of the media sometimes showed, for example when he responded to a question about his anger with the media coverage by expressing his lack of respect for journalists. Moreover, the more the investigations in the Watergate scandal progressed, the more critical became the questions of the journalists and, the more vocally critical became Nixon of their reporting.

As with his predecessors, Obama's press conferences were characterized by a calm and respectful atmosphere and did not visibly show the frictions of the relationship. Obama's considered character was very evident. He was not flustered by questions on the Affordable Care Act even when they were phrased provocatively. On the contrary, Obama frequently made jokes, which can be attributed to his humorous streak.

The mainly civil and calm atmosphere at the press conferences of Kennedy, Nixon and Obama was mostly absent during Trump's press conferences. Like his general media relationship, the interactions at the press conferences were often heated, and mostly not polite. Frequently, exchanges were very chaotic, full of interruptions and lacked the respect seen in his predecessors' interactions. The reoccurring attacks on the media with Trump accusing them of fraudulent reporting and calling them "fake news" as well as the pervading open hostility during press conferences were in fact unprecedented. Trump also insulted correspondents, called them "loudmouths," or told them to be "quiet." The White House further attacked correspondents by depriving them of their access through

challenging their hard passes. This signaled to correspondents that their access was at the White House's goodwill.

In summary, in the case of Kennedy and Trump, the impression of the interactions at the press conferences corresponded to the actual state of their relations. Kennedy's good relations and Trump's very bad relations were easily discernible. In the case of Nixon and especially Obama, the strained relationship was not so clearly visible to the observer in the interactions.

Kennedy had a clear approach to how he answered the journalists' questions during his live televised press conferences. Firstly, he allowed for many questions to be asked. And secondly, he also frequently gave candid and clear answers. This made the press conferences a valuable forum for the correspondents. At times, he used his eloquence to evade answers or flat-out denied answering questions. In case the president was not willing to answer, the media would hardly press on the issue, even in times of crisis. This is reflective of the overall more cooperative White House press corps during this time, which not yet questioned the president's and administration's words as much. Kennedy also used opening statements to try to set the agenda for the press conferences. Good examples include the opening statement of the press conference after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion where he voiced a refusal to answer questions and the opening statement in which he forcefully criticized the steel industry.

Nixon followed a different approach towards answering questions. He was knowledgeable and could rely on his eloquence acquired through his legal education. He often used the latter to evade giving direct answers to the questions asked, to say as little as possible or to steer the topic towards issues he wanted to talk about. Nixon also denied answering certain questions, but correspondents then followed up more pointedly than they had with Kennedy. The press corps would also more directly question the president's stances, for example, on Nixon's statements on a "definitive" Supreme Court ruling. This is not to say that Nixon never gave definitive answers. However, he did so frequently on issues where he probably should not have been as definitive since they often involved lies about his knowledge of the cover-up. It can only be assumed as to why Nixon would choose to state these lies. He might have thought that he needed to give a clear denial of involvement or thought the truth would stay hidden. The evasive strategies and the fact that he held fewer press conferences are an expression of his dislike for the media. Nixon did not always use opening statements, yet the analysis showed that he used them more often, the more the Watergate affair progressed. Thus, with increased revelations through the investigations,

he tried to steer the press conferences' questions by providing his viewpoints in opening statements.

As a trained lawyer and extremely well-spoken, Obama also used his eloquence to field the questions by the press corps and easily dodged or evaded many of them while he strictly stayed on message. To the viewer, this made him look like a knowledgeable and competent leader. For the press corps it was a nuisance since it made it much harder to get a straight answer out of the president. Opening statements had become a fixed part of press conferences by the time Obama came into office and he used them extensively. The president had a personal preference to discuss issues in detail and was convinced that complex issues cannot be broken down to short statements. This led to long opening statements and him giving extremely long answers to the questions asked. Annoyed by this, the correspondents accused him of intentionally "filibustering" by giving long answers so that they could not ask more questions. Obama was aware of the criticism yet did not seem to be bothered by it. He did not change his answering style in any recognizable way, and thus ignored the critique. The combination of his long answers and eloquent evasions frustrated the correspondents. In order to get answers to their questions after all and make good use of the remaining time, the correspondents often asked multi-part or follow-up question. In contrast to Kennedy and Nixon, Obama used the option to hold joint press conferences through which he effectively reduced the time in front of journalists as these conferences are typically shorter in time and his exposure to critical questions by sharing the attention with another person. In addition, Obama in general preferred venues like interviews where he could give detailed answers. His aversion to and handling of press conferences shows that he considered them less important and by that he diminished their usefulness for the press corps.

Like his predecessors, Trump used several strategies during his press conferences. Yet, he focused even more on evading questions. In doing so, he often used a combination of strategies. He frequently gave extremely long opening statements with at times random information. A particularly bizarre example happened during his press conference in April 2020, where he read out a long list of companies for minutes. Other strategies included partially answering questions, complaining about the maliciousness of the questions asked, or not letting correspondents finish their question, instead focusing on issues he preferred to talk about. He also shut reporters down by calling on the next one or, as the ultimate means, abruptly ended a press conference. The lies he told on easily verifiable facts and the perseverance with which he insisted on them no matter how much evidence there was

against his claims were unprecedented. The controversy around the drug hydroxychloroquine is just one example of many. By his press conference in August 2020, the number of false or misleading claims had reached a staggering 21,571, which prompted one correspondent to ask the president directly if he regretted his frequent lies. This factually correct but extremely provocative question was a testament to the state of their relationship.

In summary, all presidents employed strategies in their press conferences to avoid having to give clear answers to questions. However, both the strategies and the extent to which they were used varied from president to president and depended heavily on the individual character and eloquence. While Kennedy, Nixon, and Obama evaded questions with the help of their eloquence, Trump used more aggressive strategies such as interrupting reporters or ending press conferences. The open hostility in his interactions with the media was and still is unmatched. Trump further diminished the usefulness of the press conferences for the press corps as they seldom got any clear answers or could hardly rely on the words the president uttered.

Besides the atmosphere, interactions and strategies, there is one essential difference between President Trump's press conferences and those of his predecessors. Kennedy, Nixon, and Obama tried to reach the public with their messages as well, yet the focus of their press conferences was on their intended purpose: a forum where journalists could question the president. As already his strong focus on evading questions implies, with Trump, press conferences were not for the media. They were a tool to repeat his claims and to reach his supporters with the information he wanted as well as to promote himself and his actions. This became even more prominent the closer the 2020 presidential election came, when Trump frequently brought up election-related claims. His conference in August 2020 at the Trump National Golf Club Bedminster, New Jersey, even took on the feel of a small rally with Trump focusing strongly on the attending supporters who interacted with the president and booed correspondents' questions. Moreover, the president would make up excuses for them not complying with public health guidelines, arguing his supporters engaged in "political activity" or "peaceful protest." He also used his trademark charges of "fake news" against the media to animate his supporters. The press conference turned into a forum for his reelection campaign.

But the presidents not only interacted with the journalists. All four presidents also used (relatively) newly available technology to circumvent the media. However, their usage was influenced by the possibilities that the medium offered, the media environment and the

political environment they operated in. Moreover, how they used the medium and the extent of it had an impact on their general relationship with the press.

Kennedy was not only a master in managing the news media and keeping good relations with them, but he was also a master in using television. He had been an early adopter and demonstrated his understanding of it already during his time as senator when he appeared on the television show *Person to Person* in October 1953. As a presidential candidate he impressed the audience when he again appeared on a talk show and showcased his understanding of the medium television in the debates with his Republican opponent Richard Nixon. Although his success was largely influenced by his overall good performance, not only his TV presence, the debates showed that Kennedy understood the opportunities the medium brought: Direct access to many Americans at once, as he wanted, without the media filtering his words. He furthermore had realized that television required different behavior and that the image portrayed played a crucial role. Surely, his good looks did do no harm, but it was his understanding of the medium that maximized its utility for his political career.

As Kennedy, Nixon had realized early on that television was an important medium and he had used it several times successfully during his pre-presidential political career. The most prominent example is the Checkers speech (1952) where he convinced the public that he should stay on the campaign as the vice-presidential candidate. As he believed that his defeat by Kennedy was due in part to his inferior image, he strongly focused on image creation and hired television and advertising professionals during his second presidential run. He also appeared on a sketch comedy show to reach a younger audience and portray an image of a likable and popular personality.

Due to the time leap, the technological possibilities for Obama were quite different in comparison with the ones of Kennedy and Nixon. The Internet and social media allowed Obama complete freedom on content with which he could directly reach the people and therefore circumvent the media on an unprecedented scale. And he did so already during his presidential campaign. Obama showed his technological affinity and embraced the new media environment as well as displayed a deep understanding of the new technology. *My.BarackObama.com* demonstrated how online technology can be used to create offline events.

Trump had been familiar with *Twitter* since 2009 and thus had had several years to learn how to use the medium to his advantage. As his predecessors, Trump used it already during his presidential campaign and *Twitter* was one of the main reasons for him being elected

president. Thus, all four presidents had already made use of a new medium before their time in office began.

Once in office, they continued and improved their use of the new medium. Kennedy realized early on in his presidency that good press relations are necessary to get the media to cooperate in times of crisis, especially when things do not go according to plan. He learned from his mistake in the aftermath of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and was better prepared to handle the media during the Cuban Missile Crisis. This was important in connection to his television use, as the access to the medium was provided by the major TV networks. Kennedy built on his good relations and the media helped him by, firstly, holding information back and secondly, by providing him with a time slot on television. With these two concessions, they allowed the president to break the news on the missiles to the public. His deliberate use of television in times of crisis showed how far he understood the medium. Through the speech he was able to create a state of alarm and get the support of the American public. He achieved the opposite with his second address, where he could calm the public, showing that progress was made, and that dismantling was continuously monitored.

Kennedy also displayed his understanding of the new medium with his live televised press conferences. He instituted changes to the press conferences that fit his abilities and played to his strengths. He was able to portray himself to the American public as a decisive and competent leader, exhibiting his wit and rhetorical skills and impress with his performance. Kennedy's humor frequently surfaced and made him appear more appealing and charismatic but also connected him with his audience and correspondents. With live-televising press conferences, he was able to circumvent the media while at the same time providing a valuable forum for them. Moreover, he demonstrated that he was clearly aware of the power that television brought to his press conferences when he used his opening statement for the attack on U.S. Steel in April 1962. Not only did the questions from correspondents then largely relate to the steel crisis, but his opening statement increased the pressure on steel companies from the press and the public. Generally speaking, Kennedy knew how television worked and could use its advantages in all televised events. Through such proficient and successful use of the medium, television and a television image started to play a crucial role in political communication.

During his presidency, Nixon largely used television to execute the first main part of his media strategy: to circumvent the "enemy." His prime-time press conferences allowed him to reach a larger audience and thus increase his bypassing of the media. Yet, the highest

circumvention was achieved through his addresses, where he could also bypass their critical question. He used this tool four times during the Watergate affair. Here, he could portray his thoughts and viewpoints in an unfiltered way to the public. He was able to address the issues that he wanted to be remembered by the public, such as journalists' coverage being overly focused on Watergate or his denial of any involvement in Watergate. He used the medium to directly address Americans and frequently looked up from his notes to look into the camera, creating a sense of personal exchange. Even on his last day in office, Nixon used television to transport his message of a president who had experienced great injustice to the American public. Yet once again trying to instill the image of an innocent man in the minds of the people. Though, in contrast to Kennedy, he did not simultaneously keep good relations with the media. He rather used television as a means around them. The further the Watergate scandal progressed the more frequently and openly he criticized the journalists and their reporting in his addresses. Overall, Nixon was not as influential as Kennedy when it came to television, however, he had a good understanding of its possibilities.

As his predecessors, Obama used his press conferences to reach Americans, for example, when he directly addressed healthcare insurance holders who had received cancellation notices. As Nixon, he also made use of the prime-time slot for some press conferences. Obama exploited the new possibilities social media provided him with. He continued his successful social media use as president and did so with the help of a large communications team. Over the course of Obama's two-term presidency, his communications team created accounts for the White House on all major social media platforms and on some even accounts specifically for the president. In doing so, they provided a new communications setup for all successors to use.

Social media was a crucial part of the Obama White House's communications strategy as it allowed him to get in touch with targeted audiences and reduced the need to dominate the news coverage. The number of Americans the White House could reach increased drastically. At the same time, social media provided a higher level of intimacy during the exchange. Therefore, Obama could reach millions of Americans in less time but with a much more personal touch. The Obama White House did not focus on one specific social media channel for their communication but aimed for coordinated cross-channel communication to get their message to the public. They concentrated on spreading their own messages through informative and emotional posts and not on attacking others. The Obama White House also used their social media presence to engage the public in their

events and combined the online and offline worlds as for example with Virtual Town Halls. Through such engaging cross-channel communication they allowed people to become part of the political process.

Although there were also hardly any mentions of the media in posts, let alone negative mentions, journalists were still angered. They were frustrated by the extensive circumvention of the White House and argued that Obama intentionally evaded the harder questions by the press corps when he, for example, gave interviews to *YouTube* stars. As social media channels are solely managed by the White House, they made Obama independent from the media's infrastructure, and he thus could choose his interactions with journalists more freely. This meant that good media relations were not as necessary in order to get his message to the people. This reduced the necessity for accessibility and transparency contributed to the more tense relations with the media. Overall, through his social media usage, Obama changed how not only presidents but politicians in general had to communicate with their electorate.

Whereas the Obama White House's cross-channel communication was the result of teamwork and aligned with the official tone and language of other presidential communication, Trump's presidential communication strategy was strongly focused on him as the main communicator and his preferred social media medium: *Twitter*. The latter was the main communications channel and used by the president obsessively. It had two functions. First, Trump could directly get in touch with supporters to disseminate information (may it be fact or lie), tweet breaking news, promote himself and his actions, attack each and every one who criticized him or praise loyalists without any filter. In short, *Twitter* was his primary mouthpiece. As he also used his private *Twitter* account, the communication got a very personal note for supporters but also for his declared enemies. By that other White House accounts decreased in importance. Through *Twitter*, he could circumvent the media while attacking them – whenever, wherever, and how he wanted. Second, Trump was able to steer the media's coverage through his *Twitter* use. The social media platform was the perfect tool for this part of his media strategy as his tweets on the drug hydroxychloroquine showed. He could dominate the news coverage by trying to replace topics he did not want in the news with coverage of his tweets. Such distraction was done the easiest way with tweeting outlandish remarks. Those tended to generate the most interest by the media and public. And through getting his tweets into the news coverage, he reached an even broader audience with the topics he wished to.

The many and easily seen through lies were also found in Trump's tweets. As with the press conferences, Trump's priority was to look good. Disseminating factually correct information or dealing fairly with political opponents ranked significantly lower. This went so far that the White House completely disregarded the definition of facts.

The media was a favorite target, as they were at the press conferences. Trump regularly attacked them on *Twitter*, especially with labels like "fake news" or targeting them individually like the "Failing New York Times." The negative tone in the communication was also clearly reflected on *Twitter*.

Overall, *Twitter* perfectly fitted Trump's communications strategy and he utilized the medium to the maximum. He showed that social media could not only be an essential part of the communications strategy as for Obama, but that it could be the primary tool of strengthening his personal ties to his electorate. Even though his approach got Trump in hot waters with the social media companies, they recently lifted his ban right in time for the 2024 presidential election campaign.

Striking parallels can be seen in Nixon's and Trump's interactions with the media despite the long time that lies between them and the changes in the media and political environment. Sometimes, their interactions were nearly identical. They frequently touted similar themes about their administrations and the media. In their interaction with the media as well as when directly addressing to Americans they often talked about their own (at times made-up) achievements versus the damage others had done. Both also spoke of collusion against them. While Nixon believed that everyone was against him, it is unclear to what extent Trump believed this, or whether he was just making use of this narrative. Nixon frequently brought up his own innocence in connection to his involvement in the Watergate affair, Trump did so in his impeachment proceedings. Nixon talked about the "silent majority," Trump about "the forgotten people." Both expressions have the same underlying idea that people were not being accounted for by Democrats and liberal media, but through Nixon and Trump respectively, those people were given a voice.

Moreover, both presidents shared a generally negative opinion of the media. Nixon's claim of a liberal bias of the press was repeated by Trump in wording and argumentation. This liberal bias claim is, at least today, unjustified considering the current media environment. Likewise, the two presidents declared the media as their enemy, thereby they appear unified in a vigorous hostility towards them. Trump, however, took it two steps further than Nixon. One, by publicly calling them the enemy, and two, by not only making the media his enemy but "the enemy of the people." By that he extended the scope of their

enmity to all people and fraternized with the part of society that believed him. Moreover, both presidents saw some media outlets or journalists as friendly but only Trump appraised certain media outlets often openly.

Another similarity between Nixon and Trump is the fact that they frequently lied. Although Nixon's lies in the end would come to light, they were harder to disprove. This is not to say that Kennedy and Obama never lied in office, yet the amount of lies told was far smaller than Trump's. Especially the frequency to openly lie about easily verifiable subjects sets Trump apart from any of the three other presidents. Barack Obama did not try to deny the obvious problems with the rollout of the Affordable Care Act. However, denying facts and obvious problems was a strategy frequently employed by President Trump. Overall, Nixon and Trump by bringing up certain themes and trying to present themselves in the best possible way, even if that included frequent lies, both acted very self-centered.

A considerable difference between Trump and his predecessors was the willingness to voice opinions on the media. Whereas Kennedy, Nixon and Obama all had voiced criticism on the press' reporting (albeit to a different extent), none had so strongly expressed their opinions in public as Trump. His predecessors had been more circumspect or at least less aggressive in their style and wording.

Furthermore, reactions to critical news coverage of the presidents also revealed differences. Although all presidents did not like critical reporting or had not always been content with the coverage they received, only Trump denounced critical reporting or the media with terms as "fake news." It also seems that he expected full loyalty of the media and if they did not provide this loyalty they were added to the "fake news" list.

Trump was also unique in his emotionality and the anger he showed with journalists. However, this was not a purely emotional reaction to critical coverage but used strategically to portray to his constituents the gravity of the unfairness he apparently faced from reporters.

In comparison with all his predecessors, Trump had a definitive advantage due to his media environment. First, he did not have to start by instilling skepticism about the press in the public's mind as this had already been done by predecessors, in particular by Nixon. Second, the media and political environment had become extremely polarized. As Trump mainly focused on retaining his supporters, he did not have to reach across the aisle and gain support of Democratic politicians or voters, or even care about positive coverage by the mainstream media. Thus, he was able to take full advantage of the polarization. Trump attacked the media that criticized him, and his claims went largely unchallenged or were

even supported in the conservative-leaning media and by a large portion of the Republican politicians. With the help of the media and Republican politicians, he had managed that the consumers of this media diet were seldomly confronted with criticism of the president or corrections of his false statements. His supporters would end up living in a very different reality, with different assessments of the president and even in one with different or rather “alternative facts.” This went so far that all criticism of “their” president would be denounced as “fake news” by them.

The comparison revealed what made each presidents’ media communication special. Condensing it to one essential feature, Kennedy’s media communication was characterized by a symbiotic give and take between him and the press, which was visible in cooperative and respectful behavior by both sides. The salient feature of Nixon’s media communication was his strong mistrust. This sentiment not only informed his media strategy but also most of his interactions with them. His mistrust and paranoia strongly contributed to the actions leading to his resignation. The extraordinary feature of Obama’s media communications was the desire for complete control of information: both in terms of the information the White House wanted to keep secret and in terms of the information the White House actively wanted to share. Trump had a very strong fixation on his own positive portrayal, which points to the one central and distinct element underlying all actions in his media communications: the focus on his own interest.

Through the comparison it also becomes apparent how all presidents were influenced by the changing media environment, and how all made use of the new opportunities it provided. The similarities between the presidents and their affinity for novel communication technology are striking. All presidents recognized the potential of a medium that was newly or relatively newly available to them. Indeed, they not only realized the potential but also capitalized on it: they all successfully employed it to enhance their interaction with the American public. With the rise of new technology, the role of the media in shaping and filtering presidential communication has shifted significantly. In the past, the media acted as a primary filter for presidential messages. Television already allowed the presidents to circumvent the media to some extent, but today social media essentially allows to take the media out of the loop. Therefore, two of the four presidents had significantly greater opportunities. The technological advancement provided Obama and Trump with a communication medium of enormous reach. Although Kennedy and Nixon were able to reach many Americans through their use of television, the effect of

communication through social media is immense. For example, the possibilities for users to not only receive content through the medium but also be able to actively participate and share information through social media with friends was the basis for viral distribution of content provided. In this way, the number of Americans Obama and Trump could reach through social media increased exponentially.

Furthermore, the communication through social media was more instant than through television and had a much stronger emphasis on interaction. Besides being able to reach the American public in less than a second after sending a message, the people could much more easily enter into a virtual dialogue with Obama and Trump, making the interaction more personal. Through social media, they were able to take the degree of intimacy to an even higher level. Combining these aspects, Obama and Trump, in contrast to Kennedy and Nixon, had the chance to reach millions of Americans in less time and with a much more personal feeling to it.

Although Kennedy and Nixon also bypassed the media, there are significant differences in the effect of their approaches on the presidential media relationship compared to Obama's and Trump's. For Kennedy and Nixon, the news media remained essential to reach the public. Not least because to use their medium of choice, Kennedy and Nixon needed access to the television infrastructure. Yet, this infrastructure belonged to media companies. This made them still dependent on the media and they could not fully circumvent or ignore them. Obama and Trump, in contrast, had the chance to reach millions of Americans instantly and with viral potential through social media, an internet-based medium with unrestricted availability. And all of it, free of charge and completely self-determined as social media are fully detached from established news media companies. Consequently, through new means of direct communication, interacting with the media was less crucial for the two presidents. Although they did not fully ignore the media, they were less restricted in how they shaped their relationship.

Another main difference between Obama's and Trump's time in office to Kennedy's and Nixon's was that the latter's relationship with the media was characterized by more cooperation. The press still viewed the president as a reliable news source and was not yet as skeptical of his statements. This made it easier for Kennedy and Nixon to convince the media of their stance and get cooperation in crisis situations. During their times in office, the advantage was still on the president's side. Until his *ANPA* speech, Kennedy got plenty of positive coverage and friendly questioning for a foreign policy fiasco. The later cooperation on the withholding of information during the Cuban Missile Crisis was also

based on a cooperative relationship, let alone the administration-friendly article by journalists Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett in *The Saturday Evening Post* (December 1962), which Kennedy was even allowed to edit. All this does not yet include the gentlemen's agreement Kennedy had with the media. They would neither report about his health ailments nor about his sexual affairs.

Similarly, during Nixon's time in office, the press at first hardly doubted the president's statements on the Watergate affair. For quite some time during the Watergate scandal they pretty much accepted simple denials by the president and did not diligently follow indications of possible wrongdoing in connection to the White House. Journalists did not believe that Nixon would commit such illegal activities. Although the press had become more skeptical of the president due to Vietnam and the publication of the *Pentagon Papers* Nixon faced tougher questions than Kennedy, the Watergate scandal made the press far more distrustful of presidents' and their administrations' statements. By the 1980s, journalists' questions had become much more hostile as reporters had learned not to believe everything the president said and questioned the truthfulness of politicians' statements. Nixon was also the first president to strategically attack the media, accuse them of a liberal bias, and criticize their reporting. Such attacks did not further a cooperative relationship and, very importantly, paved the way for his successors to continue the delegitimization of the media.

The diminishing cooperation between the White House and the media was further influenced by technical developments such as the multiplication of channels offered by cable television or later the Internet and social media, as well as political developments, including the abolition of the Fairness Doctrine (1987), which had demanded fair and balanced reporting of broadcasters and the Republican Revolution (1994), which led to a more confrontational working relationship of Republicans and Democrats in Congress. These developments contributed to the polarization of the media, politics, and society, which lowered cooperation and strained the relationship. This also means that Nixon and Kennedy had more privacy compared to Obama and Trump. The gentlemen's agreement was clearly over by the 1990s when Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky was extensively covered by the media and his initial denial even led to impeachment. This illustrates vividly how the interaction between the media and the president had changed over time. The persisting media coverage of the alleged affairs of President Donald J. Trump stresses the media's and public's interest in the president's private life. Today, the occupant of the White House is under much more scrutiny than in the past and even the

smallest missteps are brought to light. This in turn means that every presidential candidate and president must be prepared for such revelations. Today, cooperation as Kennedy and Nixon knew in foreign policy fiascos, presidential health and covering up sexual affairs, or similar disinterest in scandals involving the executive branch is unimaginable.

IX. Conclusion

“The history of presidents and the media is a complex and contradictory story of love and hate,” writes media scholar Susan Douglas.¹¹¹⁴ This thesis shed a light on four chapters of this long story.

The historical comparison of John F. Kennedy, Richard M. Nixon, Barack H. Obama and Donald J. Trump not only unveiled the qualities of their media relationship and the nature of their media communications but also the specific characteristics of each president’s media communication and the influence of the media environment. Ultimately, the central questions of whether Donald Trump’s media communication was unprecedented and whether discussions and the medial outrage were exaggerated will be answered.

Indeed, Trump’s communication with the media was perceived by many as unprecedented. However, the comparison shows that numerous elements of his media communication were not new. Trump’s predecessors interacted in the same or similar forums with the media. Although the distribution was different, they all held press conferences and question-and-answer sessions as well as gave interviews. Presidents before Trump had already recognized the value of bypassing the media and selected appropriate technology to do so. Moreover, all had made similar complaints about the press. They for example described the media as biased or were dissatisfied with the news coverage of their politics. Likewise, several of Trump’s predecessors also had bad media relations. A prime example is Richard Nixon. The comparison showed that Nixon was in many respects very similar in his attitude towards and prejudices about the media – it could even be argued that Nixon served as a political precursor to Trump in this respect. On top of that, the comparison highlighted that the president-media relationship continuously evolved and was strongly influenced by the media and political environment presidents faced. But it also became clear that there were aspects of Trump’s media communications that, while not necessarily new in general, were unique in the extent to which they appeared.

Firstly, Trump was unprecedented in his open hostility towards critical media. He had no intention of having good relations with critical media, it was rather the opposite. Trump openly displayed his hostility and took media bashing to a new level. He even made it a central part of his communications strategy. Trump’s erratic and aggressive behavior towards the media was unmatched. This was strongly related to his focus on positive publicity. His main goal was not to persuade Americans through his policies, but rather to

¹¹¹⁴ Susan J. Douglas, “Presidents and the Media,” in *Recapturing the Oval Office*, 143.

portray a leader who governs effectively. Criticism of his person, his presidency, or his administration was therefore unacceptable. He had to disparage the media so that the public or his supporters would not believe critical reporting. To do this, he aggressively targeted critical media, which he for example did during press conferences or via *Twitter*. The hostility towards critical media was thus not just due to his personal perception, but primarily strategic, and he expressed it with an unparalleled level of openness.

Secondly, although many presidents had lied during their time in office, Trump's loose attitude towards the truth and basic facts was exceptional. Easily verifiable falsehoods were intentionally and continuously disseminated as long as they served Trump's or the White House's desired narrative, no matter how many times the media pointed out the incorrectness to Trump or his staff. This loose attitude towards facts also proved to be highly problematic for the media. They were often the target of these lies when the president accused them of deliberately false reporting or systematically labeled them as "fake news." Moreover, the media did not find a way to handle the reporting of the constant untruths until the end of Trump's presidency. Either they became entangled in correcting the president and gave his untrue statements a public stage by reporting on them, or they let the president's false statements stand unchallenged.

Thirdly, Trump had a pronounced focus on *Twitter* and masterfully exploited the medium as his mouthpiece. *Twitter* allowed him to circumvent the media and directly go to his supporters. Trump was not the first president to use *Twitter*. Yet in contrast to Obama, he frequently spread misinformation that suited his needs and harshly attacked everyone who criticized him. It represented a platform on which he could freely and frequently attack and degrade the media, whenever he wanted, without even having to be in the same room with them. His focus on *Twitter* goes hand in hand with the general focus in the communication on Trump the person rather than him as president or even the White House. This is underlined by the fact that in contrast to President Obama, he used his personal *Twitter* account. Trump was the main communicator who spread the messages everywhere he went. He did not care whether his actions were seen as presidential. He did not abide by norms, but rather pushed the boundaries of them. For instance, his communication style was often the opposite of the typical neutral and official tone of presidential communication. Instead, it was spiked with a frequent negative tone, insults, and attacks. Thus, overall, Trump's media communication was unprecedented in the extent of his circumvention of the media in combination with the systematic hostility towards them and

his readiness to delegitimize the media's credibility. This approach was supported by his unwillingness to abide by norms and by his denial of inconvenient facts.

It is not surprising that a media communication strategy founded on a hostile relationship with the media and with the aim to undermine the media's role as an objective information source sparked significant media backlash and intense discussions. Moreover, it was to be expected that Trump's strategic attack on the media's reputation was vigorously analyzed and discussed, not only by the media but also by the public and academia. By devaluing the objectivity of the media, Trump's communications strategy attempted to diminish the significant role the media plays in the U.S. democracy. Indeed, the media's role is considered so indispensable that it is guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. In this light, Trump's open hostility and self-proclaimed war against the "enemy of the people" does not align with the First Amendment. In short, the outrage around Trump's media communication was not exaggerated.

This thesis focused on one main actor of the triangle of political communication, the leader. A further refinement in this group was made to the President of the United States. It would therefore be valuable to also examine the media communications of other leaders such as politicians at the regional (e.g., state congress) and local (e.g., mayor) levels in further studies to assess possible similarities and differences. These, in turn, can then provide insight into differences in media communication between national and regional politics, which can also lead to helpful results for presidential media communication.

The triangle of political communication also offers other areas of research that could be explored in future studies. Since this thesis focused on the political side, it would be worthwhile to take a closer look at the media's side. An in-depth look at the topic from the media's perspective could shed light on the impact that technological developments have had on their reporting and their interactions with presidents. In addition, an analysis of the evolution of the media companies' financial structures could uncover on how this has influenced their news coverage. Linking such an analysis to this thesis will allow to closely examine the media's reasons for engaging in Trump's communications.

The third major player of political communication, the public, also offers opportunities for close linkage to this dissertation. By analyzing the public's role in more detail, a comprehensive picture for the interdependencies between presidents and the increasing polarization of society in the context of new technologies could be achieved.

It would also be conceivable to analyze the media communication of the four presidents while focusing more on their visual communication. Here, the official White House photographer and the influence of these images on public perception immediately come to mind. The White House photographer may have significantly greater access to the president than the media. This, too, has an impact on media coverage, as already demonstrated by Pete Souza's unrestricted access versus the media's restricted access to events with President Obama.

Only the future can tell how lasting Trump's influence on presidential media communication will be. All presidents adapted the presidential interaction with the media and the American public with their communication efforts. This thesis showed that three of them created influential blueprints for their successors. Kennedy solidified the importance of television for political communication. Successors of Nixon had the Office of Communications at their disposal. Today, presidential media communication would be unimaginable without an institutionalized communication by the president and the White House. Moreover, Nixon set in motion the strategic delegitimization of the media and at the same time contributed to the distrust of the president's words. Through his social media use, Obama redefined the way in which presidents interact and engage with their constituents. As for Trump, it is too early to conclusively judge how his controversial media communication influenced that of his successors. So far, President Joe Biden has not continued the open hostility or the focus on his own interest that characterized Trump's communication, nor has he used *Twitter* as frequently and aggressively as Trump. It rather looks like Biden orients his communication on Obama's communication style, one that he would be very familiar with, having served as Obama's vice president.

Since Biden's inauguration, the heated relationship between the president and the media has cooled down. However, with the next election coming up on the horizon, presidential media communication might change abruptly.

Thus, a key question is whether there is any way of preventing a similar escalation. This thesis not only revealed that Trump's media communication was unprecedented but also that Trump's media communication became unprecedented due to a combination of three factors that had not come together so far. This trinity of factors proved to be toxic and had a detrimental impact on the media, the democratic political system, and the American people.

The first important factor is the character of the president. Although former presidents, as Richard Nixon, had hated the media as well, what made Trump different was his lack of a guiding moral and ideals. This was further coupled with his unwillingness to adhere to preexisting norms if they did not serve his purpose. The only guiding principle was what would be beneficial to him.

Disruptive technological advances are the second factor. The comparison shows that former presidents had also understood how to use new technology to their advantage, yet social media enabled Obama and Trump to fully circumvent the media. Thus, Trump's character and the technological means came together. Although Obama had the same means, he had used them differently, most notably without Trump's hostility.

The third factor is the polarization of political and media environments. Right-wing media and the Republican Party actively helped Trump by barely criticizing even his wildest claims. They mostly went along and supported them. With their full support of the president, they validated his attacks on critical media in the eyes of right-wing leaning voters. Moreover, they helped Trump to increase the existing polarization in the country and attack one of the main pillars of the media. If the public is no longer convinced of the media's objective reporting, the media lose their credibility. And without credibility, their reporting is powerless. Many supporters of Donald Trump do not see mainstream or left-leaning media outlets as objective but rather as fully unreliable.

But despite their role as a scapegoat, where they were mostly the victims of Trump's attacks, the mainstream and left-leaning media also played an active role and were not without fault. They reported extensively about Trump during his campaign and gave him free media coverage. After his election, they continued to cover his tweets and statements. By doing so they let him drive their coverage. And even though they knew they provided a major platform to a president who tried to undermine their role, they still allowed him to do so. The paradox of this process was that they contributed to the erosion of their own position, all the while expressing indignation towards the very phenomenon they supported. Ultimately, Trump's frequent downright lies, his extreme hostility and attacks on critical voices, his circumvention of the media via *Twitter* as well as his will to delegitimize the media would have been significantly less effective if the media had not played along and the political environment had not made it easier. To conclude, Trump's character met the perfect prerequisites: A medium that could serve as his mouthpiece and an environment that would support his claims. He exploited this in a masterly manner.

Trump's communication style had serious consequences for the general well-being of the country. As a quintessential role model, the way a president talks and acts strongly influences the public's view of acceptable behavior. By exploiting the polarized environment, Trump in fact pushed the divide of the country even further.

In summary, Trump's communication with the media was unprecedented due to three primary factors: His character, the technological advances, and the polarization of the public as well as the media and political environment.

To limit the effectiveness of a similar media communications strategy, at least one of the three factors must be eliminated. A good example provides President Joe Biden. With a different character and less focus on the own interest, open attacks on the media's credibility decreased drastically. But the character of a presidential candidate can only be influenced to a limited extent. As the case of Trump showed, even when a candidate is not initially supported by the party, he can still manage to win the primary. A similar picture emerges in the general elections. Due to the electoral system of the United States, candidates do not have to be personally popular.

The technological advances pose a different problem. The clock cannot be turned back in terms of available technology. While there was a restriction on Trump's messages from the social media companies, restrictions can change quickly when the owner of the company changes, as has been the case with *Twitter*.

What remains is the polarization. The amount of hatred that exists on both ends of the political spectrum is a cause for concern. But how can the polarization be stopped or even reversed? No feasible answer has yet been found. However, this thesis has confirmed that presidential media communication matters in this regard. In the future, its influence does not always have to be negative, but could also be used to reduce polarization and division and bring the country closer together again.

These results raise a bigger question: Where is the U.S. democracy headed?

One must not forget that the direct, unfiltered access of the public to the presidents' statements, opinions, and views definitely has its benefits. When the public has the opportunity to be in a more direct interaction with the president, they can gain an independent impression about the president and his views. Even if journalists thrive for objectivity, there will always be some subjectivity involved. Yet, if certain character traits in leaders and polarization of the public, media and politics are added, the situation quickly turns bleak. The media as the fourth estate is an essential part of democracy and can only

fulfill its role to keep the government accountable and the public informed when their role is acknowledged. When a president, with the help of his party and supporting media, strategically attacks critical media, he enshrines a disbelief in the media's objectivity in parts of the public, and the media's watchdog role is threatened. Coupled with possibilities to fully circumvent uncomfortable coverage, the government could then propagate its own message without the necessary control.

Trump had little to no moral compass and a pronounced focus on his own interest. This character condition allowed him to only pursue his own benefit without regard for the consequences such behavior would bring to the country. Trump's *Twitter* use, his focus on his personal gain, lack of ethical guidance and his active strategy to demean the media, showed how effective this combination could be for presidents and politicians in a polarized society. The rise of representatives such as Marjorie Taylor Greene is exemplary of this. For now, it stays unclear how Biden's successor will use the precedent established by Trump. If it is Trump himself, the path is clear, and critical media will once more become more foe than friend.

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