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# Public perceptions of newspaper's watchdog role

by Gerald C. Stone, Mary K. O'Donnell & Stephen Banning

***Results from this survey indicate that advocating the watchdog role for newspapers is not linked to frequency of newspaper use. Youth and education level are associated with that role.***

**T**he watchdog concept, that the press is supposed to serve as an overseer of government, is among the oldest principles in journalism. Through most of American history, the watchdog role of the press was also among the nation's most revered principles.

However, with the slow but steady erosion of the public's faith in the mass media,<sup>1</sup> it is debatable whether the watchdog role of the press is still intact. Do people still consider that being a watchdog is one of the press' roles in modern society? How much emphasis does the public place on the press' watchdog responsibility today? And, assuming the concept is still intact, what types of newspaper users are most supportive of the press' watchdog role?

Given the recent resurgence of academic interest in the topic,<sup>2</sup> this study served as an exploratory survey on the current status of public perceptions of the watchdog role of the press. It is an analysis of a limited public opinion survey, yet its findings suggest on-going research into what might be a subtle change in the public's expectation of the media's watchdog role.

As a follow-up to the exploratory survey, this study reports impressions from two focus groups that offered further insights about the public's

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current perception of the media's role. Taken as a whole, these investigations suggest directions for a national study of the public's watchdog role concept.

## The watchdog role: A brief overview

The press' role in being a watchdog over government originated with Edmund Burke's 17th century pronouncement in England that the press had become a *Third Estate* in Parliament.<sup>3</sup> But it was not until the 18th century that *Cato's Letters*, a series of letters written in England that advocated a free press, were widely reprinted in the colonies<sup>4</sup> and began the American idea of the press being a *fourth estate*, a watchdog of government.<sup>5</sup>

Establishing the right of an unfettered press was tied to the American Revolution and was a 1760s precursor to independence for the colonies.<sup>6</sup> Still, it is questionable whether the authors of the Bill of Rights intended the First Amendment as a guarantee of the press' checking power on government.<sup>7</sup> Yet during the post-Revolutionary War period, the colonial press was a vigorous watchdog of the partisan political forces and had firmly established the watchdog principle by the turn of the century.<sup>8</sup>

The next phase of press scrutiny stretched beyond government investigations. With the founding of the Penny Press in the 1830s and through the 1870s, newspapers widened their watchdog role to function in behalf of informing the public and uncovering excesses of power by established institutions.<sup>9</sup>

The 1870s brought yet another dimension to the watchdog role in the form of *Yellow Journalism*, a previously negative term viewed now as the birth of democratic reform by U.S. newspapers which also included exposing government corruption.<sup>10</sup> Some of the most notorious scandals, including the Whiskey Ring, purchasing Congressional votes for the Union Pacific Railway and the Tammany Ring, were targets of the watchdog press during this era. During this era, Joseph Pulitzer began his crusading journalism, which might be viewed as the ultimate weapon in the U.S. press' watchdog arsenal.<sup>11</sup> It was copied and perhaps taken to new heights by William Randolph Hearst as the 20th century began.<sup>12</sup>

Even as *Yellow Journalism* and the crusades were continuing, the muck-raking years began with influxes from magazines and even books. This brief period (about 1900 to 1912) is considered the zenith in the press' exercise of its watchdog role because the intent was clearly to inspire action against excesses and corruption at all levels of power.<sup>13</sup>

In all, these epochs form a robust and effective development in the press' watchdog role. They clearly establish a tradition for U.S. newspapers to scrutinize the government, to uncover wrongdoing and to challenge any semblance of official corruption on the public's behalf.

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## Recent watchdog implications

Current thinking on the watchdog issue has become more complex involving media critics and the courts as some of the most momentous watchdog incidents occurred. In a battle of ideologies, contemporary media critics argue whether the press actually functions as a watchdog,<sup>14</sup> as another arm of society's elite institutions,<sup>15</sup> or as an intermediary between the two.<sup>16</sup> The majority of scholarly writing on the topic reinforces the watchdog concept.

Also acting as a powerful advocate of the press' watchdog role in continuing a 19th century legacy,<sup>17</sup> has been the U.S. Supreme Court which, in a series of nationally prominent cases particularly during the 1970s, made decisions that consistently upheld if not strengthened the checking powers of the press.<sup>18</sup>

The 1970s was a decade during which the watchdog function of the press was dramatically challenged. The Vietnam War era, Watergate and the Pentagon Papers were issues of national scope in which a more powerful executive branch of government threw its weight against the media's watchdog legacy. Although there have been mixed reviews on the media's role in these incidents,<sup>19</sup> most authorities writing about that time identify these challenges as the media's finest exercise of the watchdog function.<sup>20</sup>

*In spite of these 20th century endorsements of the press' watchdog role, recent scholars suggest that the public's disillusionment with the media has negatively affected its support of the watchdog role.*

In spite of these 20th century endorsements of the press' watchdog role, recent scholars suggest that the public's disillusionment with the media has negatively affected its support of the watchdog role.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Brian Steffens suggested that the public has lost faith in both the press and government.<sup>22</sup>

However, the evolution of the watchdog role goes far beyond the boundaries of government inquiry to include many additional institutions of societal power including public utilities, conglomerates, medical providers and a host of influential individuals who may have no official connection with public office.<sup>23</sup>

Based on this wider view of the watchdog role, which is an expanded definition of press watchdog activity in the past generation of research inquiry,<sup>24</sup> how might the public view a newspaper's watchdog responsibility today?



## Research questions

As an exploratory investigation, this study has modest expectations. It can offer findings limited only to the items on the original questionnaire. Still, the kinds of research questions posed here are fundamental aspects of how the public views a newspaper's watchdog role:

1. Does the watchdog role receive public support as an expected responsibility of a newspaper, and if so to what extent does the public acknowledge this role?
2. Are those who recognize the newspaper's watchdog role likely to be more frequent newspaper readers, and if so will they be more likely to rely on hard news and public affairs content?

*Although the specific relationships posited in research question 2 are not well grounded in newspaper readership research, extensive previous studies have documented that more frequent readers are likely to rely on hard news and public affairs content.<sup>25</sup> The accumulated evidence implies that such dedicated readers of hard news and public affairs may place more faith in the press' performance of its watchdog role.*

3. Are certain demographic segments of the population more likely to support a newspaper's watchdog role?

## Methodology

The initial data for this study came from a 1993-94 readership survey in Carbondale, Illinois, a university community. The survey added exploratory theoretical items including the watchdog role of newspapers. The specific question dealing with the press' watchdog role was:

*Some people believe that newspapers should investigate the policies of local government and the University. Others think newspapers should be more supportive of the goals of our public institutions. Do you think a newspaper should be more of a watchdog or more supportive?*

The questionnaire had two coding categories: **watchdog** or **supportive**. However, so many respondents said *both, balanced* or *not sure/can't decide*, that a

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third coding response category called *balanced* was added to include these neutral answers (though no analysis was done on this compiled category).

Definitions of the terms watchdog and supportive were intended to be inferred by respondents from the questionnaire item's wording. Allowing the respondents freedom of range in their own impressions of these terms was a primary objective for this exploratory research.

A total of 85 questions appeared on the six-page survey form, most of which assessed the local community's use and opinion of content in the local newspaper, a 27,000 paid-circulation, seven-day daily, and that of Southern Illinois University's freely circulated five-day newspaper, also with a press run of 27,000.

The findings from this exploration are in no way generalizable beyond its sample, site and span. Instead, this is a preliminary view of how some subjects perceived the press' watchdog role in the 1990s.

*The sample*

Telephone numbers for this survey were taken from the most recent local directory to include all toll-free numbers other than campus dormitory students. Excluding dorm residents provided a more accurate view of the greater community's reliance on the two newspapers being studied.

Phone directory pages were entered randomly with a random interval for selecting numbers, resulting in a systematic sample. The last digit of the phone number was reduced by one to include unlisted numbers. Each eligible sampled number was called at least three times before being relegated to a response category (see response figures).

A total of 396 questionnaire forms was completed in November 1993. A second survey phase was completed in February 1994 with an additional 84 completed questionnaires for a total sample of 480 and a margin of error of + or -5 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

**Table 1: Response Rate Figures**

Completed interviews	480	35%
Disconnected; no longer in service	266	19%
Business phone	119	9%
Changed to unlisted number	3	---
None eligible to complete/language barrier	53	4%
Refused to participate	376	27%
Any other reason not to call again	78	6%
<b>Total calls made</b>	<b>1375</b>	<b>100%</b>



The two samples were tested for comparability. Eight statistically significant differences among the 85 variables were found, but the paucity of differences justified combining the two survey phases into a single sample.

Defining the sample base as the number of calls that reach a number with an eligible respondent (completed interviews and refusals), the response rate is 56 percent; if the base is defined as all numbers dialed, the response rate is 35 percent.<sup>26</sup> The higher response rate of eligible numbers is consistent with similar telephone samples reported in the early 1990s.

### *Telephone interviews*

Junior and senior journalism research methods classes did the phone interviews after a training session, and graduate assistants supervised the actual calls. Interviewers neither reported nor evidenced problems in administering the questionnaire. Post-interview assessment of the completed questionnaires indicated that the survey was administered properly.

### *Selected sample traits*

Forty-three percent of the sample was students, a status that might include community college and technical school students as well as graduate students, a percentage that approximates the local toll-free telephone area. Because the locale is dominated by the university, several demographic traits were peculiar to the area. The low level of married respondents at 42 percent was one factor, as was the 27 percent with children in the household. Contributing to the low level of children in the household was the 10 percent of the sample above age 65.

Other demographic findings that relate to the uniqueness of a college town included education, income and age. Forty-four percent of the sample had at least a college degree, and more than half of this group had attended graduate school. In fact,

78 percent of the sample attended college while only 22 percent had not.

Income was below the national expectation, due primarily to the student population but also to the rural geographic area. Roughly one-third of the sample fell into each of these three annual family income categories: the below-\$20,000 level, the \$20,000 to \$34,999 level and the above-\$35,000 level. Age was the best indicator of a student population with 52 percent of the sample under age 35. The mean age of 39 approximated census data for the county.

Finally, the gender variable was close to an even split between male and female respondents, a result of interviewers asking to speak first to a male at the residence, but interviewing a female if no male were available.

*Table 2 shows the study's findings on the first research question and offers substantial support that people still believe newspapers should perform the watchdog role.*



The demographic findings of this survey reflect the character of the community and add credence to the sample's validity by approximating known demographics of the area.

The sample showed generally high readership of newspapers, as might be expected in a high-education locale and as has been documented by previous surveys of the area. Eighty-four percent said they usually read a daily newspaper, and 57 percent of the sample reported reading a daily newspaper on the day interviewed. The local daily newspaper was read by 61 percent of the sample's readers versus 46 percent who read the university newspaper. A portion of this difference is explained by some surveys being conducted on Sunday when the university paper is not published.

When asked which paper they usually read, 69 percent named the university paper and 62 percent named the local daily. The local paper was read an average of 3.2 days per week or 46 percent of its available days. The university paper was read 2.7 of five days, or 54 percent of the available days it is published. These readership findings suggest that the university newspaper was at least equivalent to its local competition in terms of residents' use.

Findings

Table 2: Perception of a newspaper's watchdog role

"Some people believe that newspapers should investigate the policies of local government and the University. Others think newspapers should be more supportive of the goals of our public institutions. Do you think a newspaper should be more of a watchdog or more supportive?"		
	Frequency	Percent
Watchdog	232	49%
Supportive	117	25
Both; balanced; not sure	126	26

missing data (n=5)



Table 2 shows the study's findings on the first research question and offers substantial support that people still believe newspapers should perform the watchdog role. In fact, nearly half (49 percent) of the respondents selected the watchdog function instead of a supportive or balanced role for newspapers. Those who did not choose the watchdog role were split evenly at about one-fourth of the total sample advocating each of the other two categories.

By these standards, the traditional watchdog role of the press not only still survives, but it thrives. In fact, the wording of the question may be argued to be as well balanced or neutral as possible, lending further credence to the public's perception that the press should serve a watchdog function.

Based on these findings, the first research question was answered clearly in the affirmative: The public expects newspapers to serve a watchdog

Table 3: *Perception of a newspaper's role and use of newspapers*

	Read Today's Paper (n=267)	Read Local Paper (n=172)	Read Campus Daily (n=130)	Usually Read Local (n=240)	Usually Read Campus (n=270)	Usually Read Metro (n=107)
Watchdog	60%	53%	45%	58%	69%	16%
Supportive	48%	69%	39%	69%	71%	11%
Balanced	57%	68%	54%	64%	65%	12%
Chi-square p	n.s.	<.05	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

	Watchdog	Supportive	Balanced
Mean days read local daily	4.2	4.9	4.9
Mean days read campus daily	3.6	3.3	3.9
Mean frequency of reading content in local daily ("3" is most frequent):			
local news	2.7	2.8	2.8
university news	2.7	2.6	2.6
state news	2.6	2.7	2.5
national news	2.7	2.7	2.6
international news	2.7	2.5	2.7
business	2.3	2.4	2.3
editorials	2.5	2.4	2.3
letters to the editor	2.3	2.3	2.6
weather	2.2	2.6	2.4
marriages, obits, etc.	2.0	2.4	2.3*
entertainment	2.3	2.6	2.8
movie/record reviews	2.1	2.3	2.1
sports	2.1	2.4	2.3

\*p <.05



role, and the level of support for this function is two-to-one against being either supportive or balanced.

However, findings on the second research question were not encouraging for the traditional watchdog role of newspapers. Table 3 offers outcomes from comparisons available in the survey and generally shows that those who support the watchdog role were neither more likely to be newspaper readers nor more likely to be interested in news and public affairs content.

Very few statistically significant differences are noted in Table 3, and most of those are weak. In fact, the findings show that those who advocated the watchdog function were:

- only a little more likely to have read the newspaper on the survey day;
- less likely to have read the local daily paper on the survey day;
- no more likely to have read the campus paper on the survey day;
- less or no more likely to say they usually read the local paper or the campus daily.

Although not a statistically significant difference, the watchdog support group was slightly more likely to have read one of the two major metro dailies that can be purchased at local outlets or even home-delivered. Unfortunately, only a fourth ( $n=107$ ) of the sample claimed to usually read one of these two metro papers.

More clear, however, were the findings related to average days reading the local and university papers. Watchdog advocates read the local daily fewer days than did the supportive and balanced groups, and watchdogs were between the supportive and balanced group in mean days reading the university paper.

Only two statistically significant differences indicated that the watchdog advocates might be more interested in news or public affairs. Watchdogs gave lower ratings to entertainment content and to news of "deaths, marriages, who is in the hospital and things like that," (deemed soft news compared with other categories listed). In fact, the balanced group was more interested in weather and in letters to the editor.

According to these findings, those who advocated the watchdog role were neither more frequent newspaper readers nor were they more likely to be frequent readers of news and public affairs.

The third research question suggests that demographic segments of the population are more likely to support a newspaper's watchdog role. Table 4 offers these findings and, though few statistically significant differences are noted, does suggest some implications between demographics and support for the watchdog role.

Those with more education were more likely to advocate the watchdog role of the press, and this is the most compelling demographic difference ( $p < .01$ ): The more educated selected the watchdog role, while those with less



education selected the supportive role. However, students scored slightly lower on this function and university personnel scored highest on this function. Full-time employed non-university residents scored well, but those not employed outside the home were the lowest-scoring demographic group on the watchdog function at 32 percent. Those who advocated the watchdog role were younger than those who said newspapers should be supportive, and those in the balanced category were older still ( $p < .05$ ).

**Table 4:** *Perception of a newspaper's role by selected demographics, in percent*

	Watchdog	Supportive	Balanced
Students versus non-students:			
employed students	45	23	27
non-employed students	51	29	20
university personnel	61	16	23
non-university full-time	55	19	26
non-university part-time	52	33	15
not employed outside home	32	29	39
other	42	32	26
Mean age	36.8	38.9	42.3*
Subscribes to cable television	50	25	25
Currently married	48	23	29
Dependent children living in household	54	22	24
Educational level:			
some high school to high school grad	36	37	27**
community college or technical school	48	33	19
some college	52	28	20
college degree	52	17	31
graduate school or graduate degree	51	17	32
Family income level:			
less than \$5,000	50	18	32
\$5,000 to 19,999	43	34	23
\$20,000 to \$34,999	47	27	26
\$35,000 to \$60,000	52	23	25
more than \$60,000	54	18	28
Citizenship:			
U.S. citizen	50	24	26
non-U.S. citizen	37	30	33
Gender:			
male	53	24	23
female	44	26	30

\* $p < .05$   
\*\* $p < .01$



Among demographic attributes that failed to discriminate among choices for *watchdog*, *supportive* and *balanced* were: family income, subscribing to cable television, marital status and having children at home.

Males may be more likely advocates of the watchdog role than females. The gender variable and the *not-employed outside home* status both suggested this possibility. But possibilities are all that can be said about these demographic outcomes. The answer to the third research question is that only lower age and higher education are associated with support for the watchdog role, while the other demographic differences are not supported.

## Survey outcome discussion

An exploratory analysis is at best a weak form of scientific inquiry, and this study is an example of indecisive conclusions. The single question the survey did try to measure directly - whether people still believe in a newspaper's watchdog role - provided a clear and satisfying outcome: They do.

The public's perception that the media should perform a watchdog role may be stronger than that reported by recent studies of journalists' own perceptions of their role. David Weaver and Cleveland

Wilhoit's study<sup>27</sup> of a national sample of journalists found that only 17 percent scored high on the *adversary* function, perhaps the closest synonym for the watchdog role.

**The public's perception that the media should perform a watchdog role may be stronger than that reported by recent studies of journalists' own perceptions of their role.**

But 60 percent of the Weaver-Wilhoit journalists scored high on the *interpretive* function (investigating official claims, analyzing complex problems, and discussing national policy), which also embodies elements of the watchdog role. If the two role conceptions are combined, some 77 percent of journalists see themselves as watchdogs for the public. If only the *adversary* measure is used, the public's endorsement of the watchdog role is three times greater than that of journalists.

However, given this compelling substantiation for the watchdog role, little if any of the further reasonable aspects that might be associated with support for the watchdog role were documented. For instance, it is peculiar that watchdog advocates were not more frequent newspaper readers nor were they more reliant on hard news, as previous readership research implies. Further, demographic traits that historically support greater newspaper use were not substantial predictors of advocating the watchdog role for newspapers.

Other than research design weaknesses, how might these anomalies be explained? The rationale being offered here is that a change has occurred in the way people interpret the watchdog role of the press. The traditional role of the



press acting as a check on the excesses of government has evolved in the current medley of mass media and the changing configuration of content. For example, how might the public assess newspaper, television, talk radio or tabloid coverage of issues such as:

- 1) national concerns such as the crime bill, the national debt, welfare or health insurance;
- 2) political corruption such as Whitewater and the Iran Contra controversy or political ethics cases including Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas, Sen. Bob Packwood's sexual harassment, President Clinton's sexual infidelity and many others;
- 3) celebrity incidents ranging from the O.J. Simpson murder trial to the William Kennedy Smith rape case to the television evangelist scandals to the Nancy Kerrigan/Tonya Harding incident, among others;
- 4) environmental coverage including holes in the ozone layer to the disposal of toxic waste to the spotted owl endangerment;
- 5) major crime coverage such as the Koresh cult, Dahmer serial killings, Rodney King police brutality and the Oklahoma bombing;
- 6) corporate wrongdoing such as the savings and loan scandals, stock market insider trading and toxic waste dumping;
- 7) consumer products such as the hypodermic needles in Pepsi cans hoax, cigarettes and the cancer link, breast implant surgery and faulty vehicle recalls.

These issues and incidents, and the coverage they have received through the current mass media mix, are likely to have extended and transformed the public's concept of the press' watchdog role.

## **Focus group findings**

With these considerations, the survey's outcomes prompted a more intensive look at the current status of the press' watchdog role. Two focus group sessions with a dozen participants were held in the spring of 1995: the first in the community where this survey was completed and the second in a major metropolitan area a hundred miles away.

Using the issues mentioned above and others, the focus groups engaged in two-hour sessions exploring whether these issues should be linked with the watchdog role of the press or whether they fell beyond the scope of what participants considered elements of the press' watchdog role.

Analysis of these focus-group outcomes presented in Table 5 shows that participants had very distinct ideas about the watchdog role of the media,

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**Table 5: Focus groups' perceptions of what constitutes the media's watchdog role**

Traditional Watchdog Topics		
<i>Political Corruption:</i>	Whitewater land deal Iran weapons for hostages Congress check bouncing	
<i>Ethics in Politics:</i>	Clinton's sexual infidelity Bob Packwood harassment Rostenkowski ethics case Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas	
Additional Watchdog Topics		
<i>National Issues:</i> handgun laws rising national debt health care Mexican trade agreement	<i>Major Crime Coverage:</i> Koresh cult suicides Dahmer serial killings Rodney King police brutality	<i>Environmental Issues:</i> Exxon Valdez oil spill ozone layer spotted owls preservation toxic waste disposal
<i>Military Operations:</i> Desert Storm; Gulf War Invasion of Haiti Bosnia/Somalia intervention	<i>Corporate Problems:</i> savings and loan scandals insider trading United Way funds embezzlement	
<i>International Politics:</i> World Trade Center bombing Tiananmen Square protests Fall of Soviet Union Palestinian terrorist bombings	<i>Consumer Products:</i> Tylenol poisoning Needles in Pepsi cans hoax breast implants and cancer cigarettes and cancer link	

### Sensationalizing; Not Watchdog Issues

<i>Celebrity Incidents:</i>	O.J. Simpson trial Nancy Kerrigan/Tonya Harding Magic Johnson AIDS TV evangelists indictments
<i>Celebrity Lawlessness:</i>	William Kennedy Smith rape Michael Jackson child molesting Mike Tyson rape case

and that the views expressed by the focus group in a small, rural town were consistent with those of the metropolitan area focus group. Past research suggests that small-town residents expect their newspapers to be supportive of institutions while metropolitan residents expect a more aggressive role for the



press.<sup>28</sup> This outcome was not supported. The two focus groups' views were nearly identical.

These views about press responsibility did encompass the traditional government watchdog role, but the focus group participants' conceptions about the watchdog function included additional elements associated with protecting the public from a variety of potential social and economic adversities.

Impressions from the focus group discussions provide some corroboration that anomalies found in the survey suggest there has been a change in the public's perception of the press' watchdog role.

Of course, focus groups offer only qualitative insights of a limited and non-generalizable nature. If these news coverage topics were subjected to a national random sample of respondents, would the findings be similar to those offered by the focus groups?

Assuming the outcomes were equivalent, much of the recent debate about the watchdog role of the media would change in emphasis. The traditional government-press adversary relationship concept would be expanded to include a host of public interest issues that media critics and commentators now consider beyond the scope of the watchdog role.

On the watchdog role concept, public perceptions and expectations may already have transcended the traditional limits of media responsibility. Journalists may be defining their watchdog responsibility too narrowly, while the public may be expecting more penetrating news coverage than it is getting. And the public may want less of the kind of sensational celebrity issue coverage than the media all too eagerly provides.

This study ends on nearly the same theme as many other studies with less-than-conclusive outcomes. Further research is suggested, but, in this case, a direction for continued research is clear. The next step is a national survey to confirm whether public perceptions of the media's watchdog role have evolved along the lines suggested here.

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coverage included questions about "watchdog of business on behalf of consumers" as well as the more classic watchdog of government and people in positions of power. See: John Johnstone, Edward Slawski, and William Bowman, **The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work**. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1976; Weaver and Wilhoit, *op. cit.* 1986; Akhavan-Majid, 1996, *op. cit.*

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