Two Visions of Responsibility: How National Commissions Contributed to Journalism Ethics, 1963-1975

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AND MASS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The early 1970s witnessed significant developments in journalism ethics as news organizations revised or adopted codes of conduct, appointed ombudsmen, formed news councils, and took the first steps toward integrating newsrooms. Although some scholars have argued that this emphasis on ethics was a result of the Hutchins Commission or Watergate, this monograph suggests an additional factor: three national commissions that criticized the news media between 1964 and 1970. The President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, and the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence accused journalists of prejudice, sensationalism, and even inciting violence. The commissions have been mostly ignored in regard to journalism ethics, and few scholars if any have attempted to tie together the impact of all three. This monograph presents a history of ideas notions about journalists' responsibilities - to shed new light on how journalism ethics developed in the twentieth century. Watergate highlighted issues like the use of anonymous sources, but it did not specifically suggest what journalists should do. The three commissions did. They challenged journalists to fundamentally rethink their work and the purpose of it. From a process of challenge and response, an expanded sense of media responsibility arose. This monograph offers an analytical framework of freedom and responsibility to help explain the impact these commissions had on the practice and standards of journalism in the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond.

n September 1959, a disgusted Roswell Garst made an utterly human gesture during Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's visit to his farm in Coon Rapids, Iowa. Angered by a crush of reporters and photographers trampling his cornstalks, Garst hurled handfuls of silage at the encircling journalists. An Associated Press photo of the farmer flinging hog feed at his

tormentors appeared to capture many people's attitudes toward the news media. In the same state ten years later, Vice President Spiro Agnew lobbed some verbal roughage of his own when he spoke to a regional Republican Party meeting in Des Moines. Agnew's scornful denunciation included a call for the public to "let the networks know that they want their news straight and objective." Between these broadsides, three national commissions also leveled blunt, and more substantial, criticisms at the news media. The President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, and the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence found news coverage to be prejudiced, sensationalistic, and inflammatory. Although Garst's action proved futile and Agnew's words brought stiff resistance, these commissions directly influenced significant developments in journalism ethics.

It was an unlikely outcome. The commissions were created to address national crises, not the news media. Nevertheless, they illustrated a highly unusual phenomenon in American history: government entities acting as media critics. In 1964, the Warren Commission condemned coverage of President Kennedy's assassination the previous year. It said a "milling mass" of journalists contributed to the confusion in which nightclub owner Jack Ruby killed suspected assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. The Warren Report argued that Oswald could not have received a fair trial had he lived. To protect defendants' rights, the commission asked the press to adopt a code of voluntary restraints. Journalists initially shunned the idea, but the Warren Commission prompted lively discussions about how aggressive news cover-

age should be. In 1968 the Kerner Commission on urban unrest sharply criticized the media, highlighting incendiary coverage of inner-city disturbances, biased portrayals of minorities, and what it considered news orga-

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nizations' inexcusable failure to hire more than token numbers of nonwhites. Unlike the Warren the Commission. Kerner positive Commission wanted action, not just restraint. It asked the media to work with authorities to report urban unrest without provocation, to racially integrate newsrooms, and to explain to mainstream Americans the alienation that minorities felt. Finally,

in 1969 the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence challenged journalists to fundamentally rethink how they defined news – as something more than assaults and destruction. The Eisenhower Commission (named after its chairman, a brother of the former president) also called for press councils to scrutinize the media and provide citizen input.²

Coming from any quarter, such critiques might have caused journalists to bristle. Coming from presidential commissions, this litany of fault-finding had to penetrate a wall of mistrust between government and the Fourth Estate. During the next several years, it did. Individual journalists, professional groups, and news organizations acted on many commission ideas. They revised codes of conduct, hired minorities, appointed ombudsmen, and formed news councils. By the mid-1970s, the landscape of journalism ethics had begun to change in ways Roswell Garst might not have imagined as he stood amid his Iowa cornrows.

This monograph presents a history of ideas – notions about journalists' responsibilities – to shed new light on how journalism ethics developed in the twentieth century. The Hutchins Commission is frequently credited with altering how the media viewed rights and responsibilities. Almost entirely overlooked, however, is the influence on journalism of the three government commissions examined here. The only one to receive much attention from media scholars was the Kerner Commission. Most treatments, however, have been descriptive and focused solely on minority issues such as hiring journalists of color. By examining the ideas that all three commissions contributed, a more nuanced picture emerges of the influences on journalism ethics. Most news professionals of the mid- to late twentieth century were steeped in libertarian traditions and profoundly wary of government control. This study examines how journalists grappled with their dedication to independence while these commissions challenged them to be more accountable and to adopt broader definitions of responsibility. This work contributes to a fuller understanding of the historical roots of contemporary journalism ethics, and it argues that the three commissions helped establish expectations that persist today.

Expanding Journalistic Responsibility: Historical and Theoretical Frameworks

This work builds on broad foundations of scholarship and theory. Although the Commission on Freedom of the Press (Hutchins Commission) has been extensively studied, the Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions have not. There is considerable general research on journalism ethics in the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as histories of journalism ethics. Together, these establish a framework to better understand how the three presidential commissions influenced how journalists conceptualized responsibility. In A Free and Responsible Press, the Hutchins Commission called for media power to be balanced by a commitment to social good. This was restated in Four Theories of the Press, which compared the Hutchins approach with authoritarian, libertarian, and communist models. Four Theories was a product of its Cold War times, but it established social responsibility as an enduring feature of the mass media landscape.³ Forty years later, John C. Nerone et al. revisited Four Theories and proposed that social responsibility continues as a common practice, perhaps even an ideology, but not necessarily a formal theory in its own right. Others have been more critical. John C. Merrill argued that social responsibility unacceptably impinged on journalistic freedom, while J. Herbert Altschull derided the concept as an "absurdity." Still, Merrill credited the Hutchins Commission with a paradigm shift. Before the commission, he argued, press freedom was largely defined in negative terms, i.e., freedom from government intrusion. Afterward, freedom was redefined in positive terms as freedom to help society – that is, social responsibility. The distinction is important for this study because the three government commissions amplified the call for journalists to accept such active duties.

Several scholars have addressed the Hutchins Commission's ideas in depth. Altschull described threads of libertarian thought, fed by Milton and Voltaire, and communitarian approaches, including social responsibility, "reaffirmed in every generation since Milton." Perhaps the best intellectual history of the Hutchins Commission is that of Jerilyn S. McIntyre, whose 1987 "Repositioning a Landmark" set a standard for evaluating the group's ideas. Donald L. Smith's biography of member Zechariah Chafee presented Hutchins Commission members as among the leading thinkers of the twentieth century, whose "Platonic dialogues" lent depth to their report. Mary Ann Dzuback's biography of Robert M. Hutchins placed the commission in the context of his other public efforts such as the Great Books program.

Other Hutchins Commission scholarship has assessed its historical role. The twentieth anniversary of its 1947 report was marked by a special issue of the budding *Columbia Journalism Review*. Editor James Boylan argued that the commission's conclusions were largely driven by the media structure and ownership of the 1940s, when television was not yet competitive and newspapers were dominant. Boylan also debunked the belief that

all journalists condemned the Hutchins Commission. In 1977, Margaret A. Blanchard, like Boylan, found diverse reactions, and her monograph

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expanded the commission's historical context.⁷ Stephen Bates's 1997 "Realigning Journalism With Democracy" was solidly rooted, as McIntyre's was, in archival material. Bates compared the commission with the 1973-84 National Press Council, the sole successful attempt to implement a nationwide media watchdog. Similarly, David R.

Davies's study placed the Hutchins Commission in context with other critics, including many among the media. Davies concluded that the commission "reinforced journalists' sense that public criticism ... was increasing." At the 50th anniversary of *A Free and Responsible Press*, Fred Blevins argued that contemporary experiments in civic journalism can be understood as a logical extension of communitarian social responsibility. Finally, Blanchard debunked the Hutchins Commission's dreamy evocation of an accessible early American press. She showed that newspapers of the time reflected their owners' views, not the public's, and that they had limited capacities to gather and disseminate news.⁸

Overall, the Hutchins Commission's ideas have had staying power, if not necessarily comprehensive explanatory power for the development of journalism ethics. Legal, political, and professional forces also contributed to the evolution of social responsibility.9 Furthermore, establishing the concept was one thing; understanding how news organizations enacted it is another. A fuller picture emerges through examination of the Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions. The 1960s and 1970s saw the regular appearance of such advisory panels; Lyndon Johnson appointed no fewer than twenty-eight. Scholarly literature has approached these groups from the perspectives of psychology, sociology, and political science, with the latter receiving most attention. 10 The Warren and Kerner commissions were the best-known and have received the most attention, while the Eisenhower Commission has been nearly forgotten. Much writing about the Warren Commission has addressed its political implications or spun off into assassination conspiracy theories, while the Kerner Commission has sparked serious discussions about social equity and race. However, few researchers have studied what these panels said about journalism or addressed the tensions resulting from government entities critiquing the press. Very few, if any, have attempted to tie together all three commissions. This has left an unexplored area that merits examination. 11

A voluminous number of works have addressed various aspects of journalism ethics in the twentieth century. Among the scholarship relevant to this study was that of two professors, John Hohenberg of Columbia and John L. Hulteng of Stanford and Oregon. Both provided timely and detailed analyses of contemporary issues during the 1960s and 1970s, establishing a

solid base of research that included broad topics such as responsibility and specific responses such as news councils. Another work of interest for this study was sociologist Morris Janowitz's 1975 analysis of journalists' orientations. He concluded that they could be explained by a dualistic model of impartial gatekeepers and partial advocates. Janowitz also noted the high degree of journalists' involvement in professional associations and the influence of major news organizations (broadcast and print): "The compactness of the profession implies intense interaction among its members that contributes to the articulation of professional attitudes and beliefs." Janowitz's findings on journalists' orientations are consistent with this study's analysis of limited versus expanded responsibility, while his observations about journalists' interactions inform its method.¹²

Finally, this study complements the work of intellectual histories about journalism. Reaching farthest back historically and widest geographically is Stephen J.A. Ward's research on the development of ethics and objectivity. Other work has focused solely on American media practices. David T. Z. Mindich's exploration of objectivity, Hazel Dicken-Garcia's history of press standards, and Marion Tuttle Marzolf's examination of media criticism are among the best known. Closer to the focus of this monograph is recent research by Ronald R. Rodgers and Patrick Plaisance, who have traced the development of journalism ethics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rodgers and Plaisance relied on trade journals like Editor & Publisher for much of their primary material, a method similar to that used in this study. All these authors have addressed slightly different time periods, the latest of which ends around 1950, thus enabling this work to break new ground.¹³ This study extends the chronology forward to the mid-1970s and explores in depth the origins of several significant developments in journalism ethics. Noting the oft-cited "Watergate factor," this monograph suggests an additional catalyst: the Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions. This study examines their media critiques, shows how journalists responded, and offers a theoretical analysis of freedom and responsibility to explain how the commissions influenced the standards of journalism.

This monograph is based upon primary historical sources, mostly trade journals. They chronicled professional debates among journalists and provided a regular record of occurrences, major and mundane, during the 1960s and 1970s. The two largest – Broadcasting and Editor & Publisher – were published weekly throughout this period, and issues routinely exceeded 100 pages each, furnishing detailed documentation of ethical, legal, political, and technical developments. Other primary materials include Columbia Journalism Review, the Society of Professional Journalists magazine The Quill, The Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, ASNE's Problems in Journalism, and the union newspaper The Guild Reporter. 14 Other sources include contemporaneous media reports, survey data about journalists (their demographic composition and what values they held), 15 and books by key figures in the media. 16 Every issue of the trade publications was examined between 1963 and 1975, with page-by-page analysis for key periods, e.g., after the release of commission reports. This work avoids

overbroad assertions of what journalists might have thought as a group; broadcasters and print journalists were often at odds with one another, and Sigma Delta Chi was the only association that included professionals from all media. Instead, this work benefits from immersion in the original materials, eschewing electronic retrieval or other selective approaches. This method enabled articles to be read along with the editorials, letters, minutes, and advertisements that surrounded them, presenting a full context of discussions about ethics. From this wealth of data, qualitative themes emerged inductively from reactions to the commissions. The most common themes were autonomy, freedom, and responsibility, with slight variations over time.

This study considers the following questions: What did these presidential commissions contribute to journalism ethics in the 1960s and 1970s? How did they influence journalists' concepts of responsibility? Did journalists change their practices or standards following the commissions' critiques? If so, how?

The Watergate Factor

Before considering the relationship between the Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions and the professional developments this study examines, another fact merits attention; reporters' role in investigating the Watergate scandal. For years, researchers have argued that it was a determining factor in the evolution of journalism ethics, and these conclusions have become conventional wisdom. "It was not until the monumental events of the Watergate scandal ... that a sustained resurgence in attention to journalism ethics and revision of ethical codes reemerged," argued a typical text.¹⁷ However, if Watergate prompted the news media to focus on their behavior, was by implication, not recommendation. The scandal highlighted issues such as the use of anonymous sources, but it did not suggest what journalists should do in specific situations. The Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions did. If Watergate sparked actions, the commissions had already given them direction and concrete form. The Warren Commission urged "the promulgation of a code of professional conduct governing representatives of all news media." The Kerner Commission recommended industry-wide efforts to integrate newsrooms. The Eisenhower Commission suggested a national institute to monitor media performance and evaluate standards. Many of these ideas would come into fruition within several years, accompanied by discussions about journalism ethics. 18 Before examining these developments, it is necessary to look at each commission in turn.

The Warren Commission

The November 22, 1963, assassination of President John F. Kennedy is engrained in national memory because the news media helped put it there. The story attracted unprecedented audiences and is widely regarded as the coming of age for television news. ¹⁹ However, the coverage was not without criticism. The September 1964 Warren Commission report dedicated an

entire chapter to describing how overzealous journalists swarmed Dallas police headquarters, clogged corridors and impeded officers. The report concluded that the media shared blame for the killing of accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald by Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby. The commission also argued that had Oswald lived, he could not possibly have gotten a fair trial because of the overwhelming publicity, much of which asserted his guilt. This section shows how the Warren Commission prompted extensive discussion – and some action – among the news media. Journalists' responses articulated broad themes such as autonomy, responsibility, and freedom. After briefly describing assassination coverage and the Warren Report's comments, this section examines each theme.

Assassination Coverage. Kennedy's death was one of the most important stories of the twentieth century, and most news organizations threw everything they had at it. As journalists scrambled to cover the story, their emotions, uncertainty, and intense competitiveness contributed to behavior that raised ethical questions.²² Within hours of Oswald's arrest, the third floor of Dallas police headquarters was crammed with about 300 reporters.

photographers, and camera operators. Numerous times, Oswald ran a gauntlet through a narrow hallway as police moved him from his cell to the office where he was interrogated. As officers physically pushed journalists aside, Oswald was pelted with questions despite requests to the contrary. After police finished interrogating

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Oswald, they prepared to transfer him to the county jail, and they had told the media in advance. As Oswald was hustled into a garage for the trip, Ruby pushed his way through a crowd of journalists and police and fatally shot the accused assassin. The NBC television network, which was feeding the scene to its affiliates, broadcast the slaying live. CBS followed within a minute, and ABC thereafter. Throughout the day, all three networks replayed the killing repeatedly. Even established media had trouble adjusting to this unexpected twist. The next morning, The New York Times's banner headline convicted Oswald: "President's Assassin Shot to Death in Jail Corridor by a Dallas Citizen," it read. Assassin Shot to Death in Jail Corridor by a Dallas Citizen," it read.

The Warren Report: "The Lesson of Dallas." Lyndon Johnson had been president exactly one week when he prevailed upon Chief Justice Earl Warren to lead the investigation. ²⁵ The resulting report became a news event in itself, with front-page coverage and special broadcasts. Many accounts mentioned the harsh criticism of the news media and journalists' reactions. ²⁶ The commission's language was strong: A "milling mass of insistent newsmen" had "flooded" and "jammed" police headquarters, "constantly and aggressively demanding all possible information about anything related to the assassination." Although Dallas police were primarily accountable for keeping order, the commission concluded that "part of the responsibility for

the unfortunate circumstances following the President's death must be borne by the news media." The Warren Report sought specific action: "The promulgation of a code of professional conduct governing representatives of all news media would be welcome evidence that the press had profited by the lesson of Dallas."²⁷

Journalists' Reactions: Autonomy. Journalists' comments in the wake of the assassination asserted autonomy through praising and critiquing their efforts. Praise articulated an almost heroic sense of public service; self-criticism reflected a belief (sometimes explicitly stated) that only journalists were qualified to judge their work. Many acknowledged their aggressiveness in pursuing the story, but few apologized. On the contrary, their accounts portrayed the fierce competition among reporters as integral to an independent Fourth Estate. Time magazine praised the overall performance, asserting in a Churchillian tone, "Never before in history had such momentous news traveled so far so fast." New York Times television critic Jack Gould called the coverage "matchless," arguing that the "untold millions" of dollars in lost commercial revenue erased doubts about TV's value to society. 29

Self-congratulation was balanced by self-criticism. Even before the Warren Report, journalists noted their shortcomings. For example, Gould added barbs to laurels. "For one moment of total horror nothing could quite compare with the killing of Lee Harvey Oswald ... before the live cameras of the National Broadcasting Company. It was the first nationally televised

Responsibility was an overarching theme that journalists articulated in meetings, articles, conventions and correspondence. real-life homicide." LeRoy Collins, president of the National Association of Broadcasters, chided his colleagues. "Many of our problems stem from the absence at times of simple good manners. Sometimes newsmen in the competitive jostling to get a story have been arrogant, loud, dictatorial and

unmannered." Larry Grove, a reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*, was even harsher. "I personally, feel cheap for my chosen profession," he wrote. *Dallas Times Herald* Editor Felix McKnight lamented "confusion, shouting, fighting – and in some cases bad reporting.... As an American newspaperman, I stand in the midst of partial disillusionment," he said.³⁰

The significance of this criticism was its origin. Months after the assassination, media critic Ben Bagdikian wryly praised the American Society of Newspaper Editors, "which annually peels off its own scalp, kicks its own pants and flogs itself to a pulp." However, Bagdikian warned, "Of all the great institutions of our country, the press ... is the mostly easily outraged at suggestions by other institutions that the press might have some serious failings.... This kind of doctrinaire umbrage strengthens the rather widespread belief that the press is a bully when it attacks others but a crybaby when someone pokes back." The assassination focused journalists' self-reflection on their behavior even as they were wary of others looking over

their shoulders. This duality was reflected in other ways.

Journalists' Reactions: Responsibility. Responsibility was an overarching theme that journalists articulated in meetings, articles, conventions and correspondence. Definitions of duty varied, but most journalists interpreted it from libertarian or public-service perspectives. These can be termed negative (or limited) responsibility and positive (or expanded) responsibility, and they can be defined respectively as a duty to avoid causing harm or a duty to perform actions that might do good. Negative and positive responsibility are extrapolated from philosopher Isaiah Berlin's notion of negative and positive freedom - in extreme shorthand, freedom from restraints versus freedom to choose. John Merrill applied Berlin's analysis to journalism: "We find that the philosophical emphasis is first on ethics or media responsibility to society, second on positive freedom (the freedom to act positively), and last on negative freedom (freedom from extra-media coercion)."32 By extending the positive-negative framework to ethical responsibilities, this study illuminates journalists' discussions about the Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions. Specifically, it argues that the commissions prompted journalists to consider positive, or expanded, responsibility as a norm.

Immediately after the Kennedy assassination, the negative interpretation of responsibility predominated. Journalists espousing this view favored limited actions such as refraining from overly aggressive newsgathering or withholding prejudicial information about suspects. This view was common outside their profession and was exemplified in the "free press-fair trial" debate. Lewis F. Powell, president of the American Bar Association in 1964, declared that "the news media have an important responsibility in guarding against publicity that prejudices a fair trial." McKnight, the Dallas Times Herald editor, articulated a common journalistic stance by embracing Powell's idea — on his own terms. McKnight told the ABA, "In our ranks are many editors of many stripes. Most, I would venture, oppose the thought of codes, legal restrictions backed by sanctions or any other harnessing device. We prefer to exercise our own sense of responsibility." The American Society of Newspaper Editors agreed:

We feel that many provisions suggested in voluntary codes of press conduct are indeed more harmful than the evil complained of. The fault in such codes – in addition to the legal impossibility of enforcing them or 'disbarring' violators – is that once they progress beyond statements of principle, philosophy and intent and begin to enumerate specific categories of information that newspapers must avoid reporting, they can prevent the press from meeting its responsibility to the public.³⁵

Despite this apparent rejection of even negative responsibility, foundations were being laid for positive responsibility. That is because the emerging journalistic ethic was oriented toward the public, not oneself or one's vocation. It sought to inform people and thus help society. It would evolve with much fuller force in reactions to the Kerner and Eisenhower commissions. In the wake of Kennedy's assassination, most journalists remained concerned with freedom more than responsibility.

Journalists' Reactions: Freedom. Freedom was a thread running through virtually all discussions about the Warren Commission. However journalists defined responsibility, they believed they alone should be the ones to enforce it. Confronted with perceived threats to their independence, many responded warily, even defensively. The crux of the commission's media criticism concerned Oswald's rights as a criminal defendant. Still fresh in many minds was the sensational coverage of Bruno Hauptmann, charged in the kidnapping and death of Charles Lindbergh's infant son. In 1964, many journalists' concerns about freedom were expressed in terms of court coverage. In response to real or perceived threats, journalists spoke out vociferously. "Let's stop breast-beating about the loss of Lee Oswald," wrote editor Eugene Farrell of The Jersey Journal. "He died in a good cause: Police accommodation for cameramen." Stewart Owen of the Chicago Tribune was equally unapologetic. "I'd rather go on covering the news as we have been doing and take a chance of prejudicing the state's case against the defendant than managing the news or losing freedom of the press."36 More vigorous resistance was evident at the 1964 conferences of the United Press International, the Associated Press Managing Editors, and Sigma Delta Chi (the Society of Professional Journalists). Dan Cobb, news editor of the Houston Chronicle, asserted, "All we needed in the Kennedy-Oswald-Ruby case was more caution. To hell with those who would change the system."37 Still, some journalists said they thought it was possible to go too far in defending their freedoms. "There is a grave risk that officialdom, supported by the very public we are supposed to serve, will move in and impose controls[,] which will be disastrous to any sort of press freedom," wrote Vincent S. Jones of the Gannett newspaper chain. Atlanta Journal and Constitution editor Eugene Patterson observed, "The press is second only to the American Medical Association in its 'you go to hell' attitude. The press should not forget too readily that what people think about it is important."38

Immediate Results. By the end of 1965, concrete actions had resulted from journalists' discussions. First, several organizations undertook formal studies. Second, a leading group of editors rejected the Warren Commission's recommendation for a voluntary code of ethics. Finally, a joint media committee agreed to the more limited step of pooling news coverage under certain circumstances. The last two developments merit brief consideration. Despite television's growing influence, the American Society of Newspaper Editors still wielded considerable clout in the 1960s. Its members led the nation's largest daily newspapers, and its annual conventions routinely attracted presidents and other national figures. Although the ASNE had a code of conduct, the Canons of Journalism, members had doubts. "Words like 'code' bug me," wrote Jim Fain of the Dayton Daily News. "They sound like something out of marble.... Does this mean reincarnating Hammurabi? I doubt he could handle a fast-moving situation like

Dallas." New York Times Managing Editor Clifton Daniel saw a legal pitfall: "We doubt that such a code [as the Warren Commission proposed] would be constitutional. We see no practical means of enforcing it without licensing

the press, and licensing would destroy the freedom of the press."³⁹ The editors offered some ideas of their own, however. They encouraged the news media "to undertake with open-mindedness and sincerity frequent discussions" with the legal profession and law-enforcement agencies, and they recom-

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mended that journalists reaffirm their commitment to providing full news coverage with "restraint, good taste, and scrupulous regard for the rights of defendants."

The Joint Media Committee on News Coverage Problems, which included broadcasters and print journalists, was more pragmatic. It proposed pooling – that is, designating a few journalists to represent all media during emergencies. The joint committee, formed in direct response to the Warren Commission, focused on how to curtail "the disorder often created by working journalists and technicians in covering major events." In October 1965, the committee distributed 50,000 copies of its report to newspapers, broadcast stations, and public officials. The booklet contained suggestions to help officials arrange orderly mass coverage, outlined the obligations of the "pool man" to his colleagues (to "make an immediate and full report of what he has witnessed to all others in his category"), and suggested priorities for which media to include. 41

These were discrete but modest steps. Two days after the Warren Report's release, *The Washington Post* editorialized, "The news media and the authorities can do better than this[,] and under the prodding of the Report's recommendations no doubt they will." That proved too optimistic, at least in the short term. A *Boston Globe* reporter who covered the assassination said he and his colleagues were "aware of the news herd problem," but more than a year later he concluded that "the lesson of Dallas" was "a lesson unlearned." Still, there was an important intangible consequence: The biggest news event in decades had prompted journalists to discuss their ethical shortcomings and how to address them. A few years later, that discussion would be intensified by a new crisis and a report by another presidential commission.

The Kerner Commission

Six days after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965, the Watts district of Los Angeles erupted in flames. Two summers later, dozens died in Detroit, Newark, and other cities, prompting people to ask how such devastation could occur amid the Great Society. As Detroit still smoldered, Johnson created the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, led by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner. Among the ques-

tions Johnson posed was "What effect do the mass media have on the riots?" This reflected journalism's technological evolution. Earlier urban violence had been reported in newspapers and on radio; by the mid-1960s, television had become the primary news source for most Americans, and it drew scrutiny and criticism.⁴³

When the Kerner Commission issued its widely publicized report in March 1968, it became famous for the conclusion that "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal." The commission partly blamed the news media for the split, arguing that journalistic bias contributed to racial misunderstanding. The commission called on the media to improve the coverage, representation, and employment of minorities. How journalists responded is the subject of this section. The first part describes coverage of urban unrest. The second recounts the commission's media criticism; the third, journalists' reactions; and the fourth, short-term results through 1969, when campus unrest had supplanted urban violence as a focus of concern. The emphasis is on news reporting in "mainstream" media, not black or other ethnic media, because the Kerner Commission addressed journalists working for what it called "the white press."

Coverage of Urban Unrest. Urban violence was the biggest domestic story since President Kennedy's assassination, and what lav beneath it race - was the biggest "since the Civil War," wrote Vincent S. Jones, executive editor of the Gannett newspaper chain. News organizations were illprepared to cover either. "Most American newspapers are not reporting the story of the American City – either because they don't want to, or because they don't know how," said Ben W. Gilbert, deputy managing editor of The Washington Post. Many journalists were ignorant of urban issues, and when violence erupted the learning curve was traumatic. "It was horrible, just horrible; an absolute war zone, worse than front-line duty," United Press International photographer Joel Landau said about his July 1967 experiences in Newark. "I got the Purple Heart in World War II, but covering riots is something else; there's no sense to it," said Harry Leder, UPI's chief photographer in New York. From Watts to Washington, reporters, photographers, and videographers – some of whom had been beaten by whites while covering civil rights in the South – found themselves targeted by blacks, and several journalists were seriously hurt. 46 The overriding concern about coverage, however, stemmed not from journalists' safety but that of the public. Observers worried that television's bright lights and ability to broadcast live could incite violence. Wall Street Journal Editor Vermont Royster was one. "That winking light on the TV camera can spur a group of marchers to behave like a mob," he said, and the Kerner Commission would amplify his concerns.47

The Kerner Report: Not "Just Another Story." When Johnson created the Kerner Commission, he asked the group to report in a year. They considered their work so urgent that they finished in seven months. The result was a mobilization only slightly less frantic than that of the journalists who reported on the riots. A staff of 115 included sociologists, communication

scholars and at least one journalist. Teams surveyed officials, news media employees, inner-city residents, and the general public to assess their views of the coverage. Researchers conducted a quantitative content analysis of television and newspaper reporting in fifteen riot cities. Considering the rushed schedule, substantial data were collected.

As with the Warren Commission, the Kerner Commission's report was highly anticipated. It presented three broad conclusions about the media: First, although distortions and sensationalism occurred, journalists "made a real effort to give a balanced, factual account of the 1967 disorders"; second, despite this, "The overall effect was ... an exaggeration of both mood and event"; and third, the media had failed to investigate "the underlying problems of race relations." The report traced the exaggeration to "gross flaws": sensationalism, which included disseminating rumors, publishing "scare headlines," and staging violence for TV cameras; uncritically reporting inaccurate accounts about the riots' extent and damage; and coverage that framed the unrest as a black-white conflict.⁴⁹

The most acute criticism was that the media did not employ sufficient minorities. The report found that blacks distrusted the media because they were perceived as biased mouthpieces of the white power structure and because reporters relied on police, not inner-city residents, for information.⁵⁰ As the news media chased breaking events, they neglected to dig out "underlying grievances and tensions," the report concluded:

The media report and write from the standpoint of a white man's world. The ills of the ghetto, the difficulties of life there, the Negro's burning sense of grievance, are seldom conveyed. Slights and indignities are part of the Negro's daily life, and many of them come from what he now calls 'the white press' – a press that repeatedly, if unconsciously, reflects the biases, the paternalism, the indifference of white America.... The press acts and talks about Negroes as if Negroes do not read the newspapers or watch television, give birth, marry, die, and go to PTA meetings.⁵¹

The Kerner Commission did more than criticize. It offered practical advice and called for higher standards. "The media simply must exercise a higher degree of care and a greater level of sophistication than they have yet shown in this area – higher, perhaps, than the level ordinarily acceptable with other stories," it argued. "This is not 'just another story.' It should not be treated like one." As after the Kennedy assassination, journalists hashed over their performance, and the Kerner Report joined a conversation in progress. Journalists' reactions articulated earlier themes: freedom, autonomy, and responsibility. This section addresses these themes in slightly different order from the previous section. Whereas the Warren Commission elicited strong defenses of journalistic freedom, the Kerner Commission had its most profound influence on journalists' notions of responsibility.

Journalists' Reactions: Freedom. As before, some journalists opposed the Kerner Commission's recommendations as threats to freedom. The rhetoric of an independent press permeated their discussions, and mistrust of authority was a constant theme. One Kerner proposal became a lightning rod for resistance: "thoughtful, stringent staff guidelines ... must be universally adopted if they are to be effective in curbing journalistic irresponsibility." To many journalists, universality smacked of imposed codes, and they reacted accordingly. An April 1968 survey of news executives concluded that there was no need for even voluntary restraints. Reasons included objections to formal policies ("I'm an enemy of codes," one editor was quoted as saying; "I do not think that this can be reduced to a code," another said) and concerns about independence. As one editor put it, "Codes or guidelines ... are invariably used against the free flow of legitimate information." Resistance eased over time, however, and by 1969, there were almost no expressions of opposition to the Kerner Commission's ideas.

Journalists' Reactions: Autonomy. Autonomy suffused responses to the commission. Journalists' comments reflected many of the same subthemes as earlier: competition, self-congratulation, self-criticism, and wariness of external criticism. These elements played out differently because the nature of the story – hundreds of scattered riots versus a single event – was different. So were some attitudes. In covering racial violence, competition seemed to be less important to journalists than before. Several reached across the broadcast-print divide. One was J. Edward Murray of the Arizona Republic, who asked, "Are we, the newspapers, going to defend the untrammelled right of TV to give what the most people want, even if it trivializes and corrupts the democracy, if it does, or are we ... going to admit that what the Hutchins Commission once tried to do to us now ought to be done to television?" Simultaneously magnanimous and dismissive, Murray articulated both the complexity of journalists' responses and their leeriness of anyone outside the media.

Autonomy also was reflected in self-congratulation. Urban unrest was chaotic and hazardous, conferring bragging rights on those who covered it. Stories of swiftness, enterprise, and sacrifice were common in trade publications. Most accounts reflected journalists' zeal for "getting the story." One report described "day and night danger, heroics, and courageous news coverage as a small army of reporters and photographers spread out over a 50-square-mile area of burning buildings, sniper fire, raging mobs, [and] roadblocks." Newscasters claimed laurels for comprehensive coverage: "Regular programming was arbitrarily interrupted or pre-empted. Commercials were cancelled. The news came first," *Broadcasting* wrote. *The Quill* proclaimed, "Never in its history perhaps has the press, both print and broadcast, responded with such devotion to responsibility for telling the news with both restraint and courage, and at such high monetary cost and physical drain of its personnel." 57

All the while, journalists judged themselves. After Watts, for example, one reporter asked "if I had adequately reported the Negroes' story. I had to admit I had not, and I believe that few of my white colleagues had either."

Other journalists feared that their presence had fanned the flames. Los Angeles station KTTV broadcast riot film scored to chase music, while KTLA's live "Telecopter" was blamed for incitement and sensationalism. "Snipers ... took pot shots at it," *Broadcasting* reported. So did critics. "The most disturbing effect of televised news coverage is that, like LSD, it tends to create a heightened and often spurious reality of its own," *Columbia Journalism Review* charged. ⁵⁸ After Newark and Detroit, similar (if less psychedelic) self-criticism ensued. Norman Isaacs, executive editor of the *Courier-Journal* and *Louisville Times*, called the reporting "trigger-happy," while *Arizona Republic* Managing Editor J. Edward Murray noted the criticism that "we ignored the minorities too long, and are now doing too little about them." Throughout, journalists were proud of their willingness to look in the mirror. "Who says there is no critical self-analysis by newspapermen of the product they produce every day?" asked *Editor & Publisher*. ⁵⁹

Journalists' Reactions: Responsibility. As journalists talked and wrote about urban violence and race, they sounded a consistent theme of responsibility. As seen in the previous section, there were divergent opinions about what responsibility entailed and to whom it was owed. In discussions surrounding the Kerner Commission, the concept of responsibility again split two ways: negative (or limited) and positive (or expanded). As before, these were articulated respectively as a duty to refrain from actions that might cause harm or a duty to perform actions that might do good. Unlike before, the Kerner Commission went beyond the Warren Commission's call for restraint and asked the news media to accept duties to assist minorities. This call elicited some affirmative responses.

One came from Life Managing Editor George Hunt, who told a conference that journalists were called "to accept community responsibilities as well as editing responsibilities." Several weeks after the Kerner Report, the American Society of Newspaper Editors convention featured a panel session, "Conflict in the Cities," where speakers reframed urban coverage. Panelists related success stories and urged the media to tell about them. Whitney Young, executive director of the National Urban League, shared a similar message with another group of journalists. Minorities wanted proof of journalistic commitment, he said, some evidence that "your newspaper has actually enlisted in the struggle for equality for the duration and has not confined itself to just a beautiful editorial about Martin Luther King after his assassination."60 Several seemed eager to answer that call. Philip Meyer, a Washington correspondent, wrote that a responsible news organization "does not turn its back on a problem. The more the race problem is discussed, analyzed, dissected, and turned upside down to find what's there, the sooner there will be workable solutions." Milwaukee Journal Editor Richard H. Leonard said such work was not just desirable, but imperative. Journalists, he said, had "no other honorable course than to assume a leadership role in solving urban problems."61

Immediate Results. The Kerner Report added momentum, even urgency, to journalists' discussions about urban violence and race. The report echoed journalists' public reflections about avoiding harm and doing

good – about negative and positive responsibility. Above all, the commission sparked newsroom integration, which over time would literally change the face of journalism. In the early 1970s the ranks of news professionals were more than ninety-five percent white, and it took years to recruit, train, and hire significant numbers of minorities. Demographic surveys of journalists reveal the slowness of change, starting with baseline data compiled in the autumn of 1971 by John W.C. Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski, and William W. Bowman. Their work was followed each succeeding decade by David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, who noted the creeping pace of integration and found it "disappointing, given the efforts to recruit minorities by U.S. news media, the increased enrollments of minorities in U.S. journalism schools, and increases in the proportions of blacks and Spanish-Americans."62 The data were somewhat confounded by Weaver and Wilhoit's early categories, which identified journalists as black, Hispanic, Oriental, Jewish, or other (including white), but they trace the progress of diversity in the industry. Meanwhile, smaller-scale efforts took place in newsrooms. One was led by Charlotte Observer Editor Pete McKnight, who published an informal survey of editors' minority hiring experiences. Managers across the country reported having a hard time finding enough applicants. "You don't just turn on a tap that has been closed for generations and expect it to start flowing immediately," wrote Mort Stern of the Denver Post. 63 The Kerner Commission increased demand on the tap. "The recruitment of Negro reporters must extend beyond established journalists, or those who have already formed ambitions along these lines," it urged. "It must become a commitment to seek out young Negro men and women, inspire them to become - and then train them - as journalists." The mismatch of supply and demand created predictable results. "In many quarters the effort is to find the Instant Negro Reporter, the Instant Negro Cameraman, the Instant Negro Copyreader," complained Armistead S. Pride, head of the Lincoln University journalism department. "It can hardly be gainsaid that the momentum has been fed to a considerable degree by the forceful indictment of the American press in the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders."64

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the racial, ethnic, and gender diversification of American newsrooms that began at this time. It affected not only news organizations but also the journalism they produced. In immediate terms, it meant an improved ability to cover diverse communities and events such as racial violence. However, hiring was spotty. "It is impossible to speak of mass media in America without adding the specification of white or black mass media," wrote *Ebony* publisher Lerone Bennett, Jr. "There is a need for white-oriented media to integrate their vision, their control and their management. In other words, we face the need, not for just a new reporter here, or a new story there, but for fundamental change in the spirit permeating white-oriented media." This was particularly true in broadcasting. Whereas the black press enjoyed a long tradition and the 1960s saw a flourishing of papers such as the *Chicago Daily Defender* and the Washington, D.C., *Afro-American*, there were few

nonwhite stations on the air. Nevertheless, both print and broadcast media touted their integration efforts in trade journal articles and display ads that pictured young minorities getting on-the-job training. Ford Foundation efforts received praise in *Broadcasting*, while an American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation scholarship fund "not only will be the answer to the Kerner Commission's complaints about us, but it will be a contribution to our national welfare in an area where we may not have done everything we could have," a publisher argued. As news organizations accelerated their hiring drives, some minorities moved into leadership positions. The Toledo, Ohio, *Blade* promoted William A. Brower to news editor, and Roy Wood, Sr., of WVON-AM in Chicago was elected to the Radio-Television News Directors Association board. 66

Incremental as these developments were, they were evidence that journalists were paying attention. Although one commentator noted that "most commission reports are the essence of ephemera, quickly consigned to archival oblivion," the Kerner Commission had a tangible and lasting impact on the mass media. ⁶⁷ The commission took sensitive issues that had been discussed in professional spheres — conventions, symposia, and the pages of trade journals — and made them national news. The commission quickened a conversation among journalists about race, responsibility, and ethics that is still going on.

The Eisenhower Commission

Milton Eisenhower, brother of the former president, was retired as head of Johns Hopkins University when some former students stopped by his home on June 5, 1968.⁶⁸ They were upset about the shooting of Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and they wanted to talk. As they discussed the event and its implications, Eisenhower's phone rang. It was President Johnson, who got right to the point: Troubled by Kennedy's shooting and the earlier assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., he wanted Eisenhower to lead a commission to study violence in American society. Johnson wanted an answer immediately. It was about 9:40 in the evening; at 10 p.m. the president would go on national TV to announce the panel and its new chairman. Several hours after Johnson spoke, Kennedy died of his wounds. Although born in tragedy, the Eisenhower Commission contributed to journalists' understanding of the relationship between the news media and violence.⁶⁹ This section describes the commission's criticisms of the news media and examines how journalists reacted. Their responses were similar to those after the Warren and Kerner commissions and reflected earlier themes of autonomy, freedom, and responsibility. Although a new theme of skepticism also emerged from journalists' conversations about the commission, it was balanced by another new theme, professionalism, which offered a means of enacting journalistic responsibility.

Eisenhower Commission Reports. Of the three groups examined in this monograph, the Eisenhower Commission was the least known, but it produced the most substantial critique of journalism. It employed hundreds of experts in sociology, psychiatry, history, political science, communication,

and law. Task forces studied nine separate aspects of violence ranging from political assassinations to media portrayals. Each task force produced a supplemental report. Two supplemental studies gained widespread attention: Daniel Walker's *Rights in Conflict*, which dubbed the disturbances surrounding the August 1968 Democratic National Convention a "police riot," and Jerome Skolnick's *The Politics of Protest*, which chronicled the dissent of black militants, student rioters, and antiwar demonstrators. This massive social-science effort yielded fifteen volumes. For the study of media violence, the commissioners "became students of journalism," questioning witnesses and reading academic research.⁷⁰

The Eisenhower Commission's media proposals appeared in the final report and the report of the media task force. The former included a chapter on violence in television entertainment. The 614-page task force report, *Mass Media and Violence*, was a major work of journalism criticism. It studied the history of the American press, the credibility of the news media and public access to it, coverage of protests and civil disorders, journalism education, and media practices. Although the idea of a presidential commission criticizing the news media rankled some, coeditor Robert K. Baker defended the task force's work. "From the outset many people asserted, sometimes quite vituperatively, that it was not only improper but unconstitutional for a governmental body even to study the media," he wrote. "We reject this position.... This commission has no sanctions to impose, and we do not believe that studies of this kind have any chilling effect upon the exercise of First Amendment rights."

The task force report made eight recommendations for the news media. They included seeking public criticism, possibly via press councils (an idea borrowed from the Hutchins Commission); establishing "a code or other form of guideline to be followed in the coverage of riots or other events involving group violence" (reiterating the Warren and Kerner commissions); hiring minorities (echoing the Kerner Commission); and covering protests in a manner that emphasized context.⁷² The Eisenhower Commission stated forceful, positive expectations:

New journalistic forms are needed. After events are reported, something more is required – opinions, analysis, solutions. These opinions do not always come from the proverbial pillars of the community; frequently they will come from new voices which, at the present, have a very hard time getting into the media.... This will require not only information about events, violent and non-violent, but ideas about what to do about these events. It is a new kind of journalism.⁷³

This was an ambitious goal, but Baker hoped the report would spur voluntary reforms. "The government can no more legislate good journalism than it can legislate good manners. More important than the adoption of specific suggestions is that each news organization make an independent determination of the efficacy of its own policies and practices."⁷⁴ Despite initial resistance, journalists considered the Eisenhower Commission's reports in depth and discussed them for months.

Journalists' Reactions: Skepticism. The Eisenhower Commission suffered from bad timing, for it coincided with what might be termed "commission fatigue." Coretta Scott King protested, "Even intense prayer and a new commission of notables will not ease the violence in our life - though acting forthrightly on the recommendations of the Kerner Commission might be helpful." The trade journal Broadcasting editorialized: "It is all a little unreal. The President appoints a commission – the knee-jerk reaction that usually strikes heads of governments when confronted by perplexing events - and explicitly refers to the 'public's airwaves' as one place for the commission to search for causes of violence in this country." Editor & Publisher shrugged off the task force's list of suggestions, "most of which reads like an ABC Primer for Journalism School." It also mistrusted the commission's motives: "Most so-called national study groups usually end up with a recommendation that the industry in question can't handle its own problems and government, therefore, should step in and do it."75 Despite this standoffish skepticism, journalists articulated other, familiar themes.

Journalists' Reactions: Autonomy. As earlier, journalists looked upon their work and called it good. Their self-congratulation was followed by self-criticism, again reflecting their belief that they were their own best watchdogs. To address external criticism, journalists made claims of professional dedication and expertise. Evaluating the news media in the wake of the King and Robert Kennedy assassinations, Columbia Journalism Review approvingly commented: "The quality of both radio and television coverage was no longer a matter of surprise. America had come to expect it in these moments of disaster." New York Times television critic Jack Gould wrote three columns in four days as he watched the coverage of Robert Kennedy's shooting, death, and funeral. "The networks ... did a remarkably restrained and thorough job in covering the multiple facets of the story beset by confusion, hysteria, sorrow, grave medical speculation and unpredictable political implications," he wrote. 76 Broadcasting also heaped praise on TV's performance, but others disagreed. As before, journalists engaged in vigorous fault-finding. Columbia Journalism Review balanced praise with caustic criticism: "The real conflict between television's higher and lower nature began at 11 E.S.T. Wednesday morning. ABC-TV, the first on the story, was the first to relinquish uninterrupted coverage, in favor of a frantic Sealtest Milk commercial.... While Archbishop Cooke prayed for Senator Kennedy's recovery, CBS was plugging Birdseye peas and Bumble Bee Tuna."77 This combination of admiration and condemnation was a mere prelude to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The event drew thousands of demonstrators, many of whom taunted police and defied orders to disperse. Officers responded with clubbing, tear-gassing, and mass arrests. Journalists were targets, too; sixty-three were assaulted by police. Many attacks resulted in injuries, and several involved deliberate destruction of cameras or recording equipment. Chicago also became a focal point for criticism about news coverage of violence, with verbal blows raining down like police clubs. This surprised journalists, who had expected laurels, not cudgels. Journalists' response to Chicago was perhaps the greatest misapprehension of their public standing in the 1960s and 1970s. While dissent and authority clashed, the news media tried to occupy a middle ground. But to the public watching the coverage, journalists seemed to side with the antiwar demonstrators and Yippies. A columnist for *The Guild Reporter* thought people would rally to the news media: "What Mayor Daley did not understand ... is that his enemies tasted the full fruits of triumph when reporters went down in the midst of guards in the convention aisles, cameramen bled from wounds, and police stripped off their identifying badges the better to flail with their clubs." Under such circumstances, "Public sympathy flows swiftly."

Sympathy did flow – in the opposite direction. "Public opinion polls taken immediately after the earliest street battles tended to support the

As they became aware of the gap between themselves and the public they strived to serve, journalists responded by arguing that they were experts, a strategy that aimed to raise their standing and rebut opposition. police in their savage nightstick-swinging attacks," The New York Times editorialized. "This may reflect a tragic willingness among many Americans, frightened by the widespread unrest in the nation, to condone high-handed suppression of fundamental freedoms." Within weeks, pollster George Gallup confirmed the public sentiments, telling a New York symposium that "never has the media [sic] ... been

held in such low esteem" and that people were "no longer satisfied with the obsolete formula and tired practices of journalism from another era."⁷⁹ In response, journalists founded *Chicago Journalism Review*. The first issue examined whether local news outlets contributed to violence by giving unruly dissidents too much publicity. "Perhaps a new policy should weigh the importance of the gripe and the size of the group – rather than ... the degree of violence and disruption."⁸⁰

On a national level, Norman Isaacs, president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1969-70, felt that his colleagues' outrage against external criticism went too far. Referring to his testimony before the Eisenhower Commission, he wrote, "The main thrust of my complaint was that all the forms of journalism are exhibiting a defensiveness that is almost paranoid; that there are many things which we do wrong, things we admit to each other when gathered privately in the bar, but which we stubbornly refuse to concede in public." Former NBC News President Reuven Frank diagnosed the same malady. "News professionals began to show signs of a new paranoia, convinced by polls that the public did not love them anymore." Perhaps so. By the time the Eisenhower Commission issued its media critique, self-congratulation and self-criticism were familiar journalistic responses. External criticism in the form of wholesale public repudia-

tion was less familiar, however, and it involved autonomy by challenging journalists' sense of who they were.

As they became aware of the gap between themselves and the public they strived to serve, journalists responded by arguing that they were experts, a strategy that aimed to raise their standing and rebut opposition. For example, *Washington Post* editor J.R. Wiggins wrote, "It is only inexperience and ignorance that inspires [sic] people to suppose that all interventions and coercions of the media originating outside of the press are influences making for the betterment of the press." Howard R. Long, chairman of the journalism department at Southern Illinois University, added, "Of course the members of the [Eisenhower] Commission know little about the press and the way it operates." John Tebbel, a *Saturday Review* critic, fashioned a detailed claim of professional expertise:

No one doubts that the performance of both broadcast and print journalism could and should be improved. The improvement, however, ought to come from professional concern and knowledge, and not through pressure by laymen who want to implant their own standards of news judgment. As one eminent editor has observed, few people outside the professions of law and medicine would have the presumption to tell lawyers how to argue a case or surgeons how to perform an operation, but every Tom, Dick, and Spiro appears to feel qualified to tell media people how to perform their jobs.⁸²

Isaacs, like many of his peers, believed fervently in reforming the vocation – and he believed only they knew how to do it. "I happen to see a lot of good things about the task force report," Isaacs said. However, he added, "My argument has been that the country's editors have to stand up as the conscience of the profession, and we ought to be the ones to set up the machinery to police the calling."⁸³ As expressed in response to the Eisenhower Commission, autonomy did not preclude taking responsibility but directed it from within, as will be seen in further detail below.

Journalists' Reactions: Freedom. Another familiar response to criticism about media violence was to invoke the free-press tradition. Some members of the news media saw significant threats. Sigma Delta Chi president Staley McBrayer said that 1968 had been a year of "Sock-it-to-the-Press, Baby" and that outsiders did not realize the "gravity of the situation facing the press and the public's right to know." The Federal Communications Commission gave form to many fears. After Vice President Agnew's Iowa speech in 1969, FCC Chairman Dean Burch personally telephoned executives at all three networks to request transcripts of the "instant-analysis" commentaries Agnew had denounced. Although the agency ruled that the commentaries had met its fairness standard and did not require the networks to offer rebuttals, many observers – not only journalists, but also members of Congress and other FCC commissioners – found

the chairman's actions chilling. The commission rarely revoked licenses, but *Broadcasting* feared that there might be no checks on the FCC's power. If that happened, it editorialized, "Television newsmen may only hope that they will have earned enough public support to mount a popular uprising against a political take-over of the medium." Given the attacks against television, *Broadcasting*'s editorial vehemence is not surprising. "Broadcasters have no alternative. They must mount the biggest offensive ever to prevent the unreasoning politicians, the envious competitors, the bureaucratic trouble-makers and irresponsible do-gooders from perpetuating a great hoax upon the American people," it argued. Even Walter Cronkite joined the fray. "Those of us in television and radio, subject to the onerous dishonor of federal license and control, hear abroad in the land the approaching tread of the witch hunters, the robed figures of the Inquisition, the thought-controllers who seek to muzzle the powerful voice by the old and sleazy trick of impugning our motives," he warned.⁸⁵

At least one journalist feared that his colleagues were crying wolf. "The people of the country are bored and disillusioned with the endless talk in which we now engage about the theory of press freedom," American Society of Newspaper Editors President Newbold Noyes said in 1970. "They have, in all this self-serving palaver, lost the point, which is that without real freedom to report the news and comment on it, there can be no such thing as democratic government."

Journalists' Reactions: Responsibility. As they asserted their freedom, members of the news media also discussed their responsibilities. As in the aftermath of the Warren and Kerner commissions, notions of journalistic responsibility again diverged along two paths: negative (or limited) and positive (or expanded). Once again, these were a duty to refrain from actions that might cause harm or a duty to perform actions that could do good. In terms of the news media and violence, negative responsibility was expressed in subthemes of competence and restraint. For example, Columbia Journalism Review stated that journalists could learn from the Eisenhower Commission's task force report: "Journalists who have spread erroneous reports ... must stop thinking, 'Given the same circumstances, I would probably do the same thing again.' ... We must change our thinking to: 'Given the same circumstances and what I now know, I would report only what I could verify." When Norman Isaacs testified before the Eisenhower Commission, he said the media "have to accept the idea that we need responsible restraint in the coverage of crime and violence."87 Also testifying before the Eisenhower Commission was CBS News President Richard Salant. He explained that his network had issued guidelines to minimize incitement during disorders:

To keep from spilling more fuel on the flames ... CBS News and news department[s] of the CBS Owned stations have instructed their news personnel to: (1) use unmarked cars, with very few exceptions, when carrying equipment and personnel to riot scenes, (2) avoid using lights when

shooting pictures, since lights only attract crowds, (3) obey all police instructions instantly and without question – even in the occasional cases where their orders may seem unreasonably harsh, (4) exercise extreme caution in estimating the size, intensity, and mood of a crowd, (5) check out all rumors and eyewitness reports before using them, (6) balance all statements by rioters or their supporters with others by using responsible officials, and (7) play the news straight, without emotion, and avoid catchwords or phrases – such as 'police brutality,' 'angry mob,' etc. – that may antagonize or inflame an already incendiary situation. The important thing is to convey to the viewer that he is seeing only the impression of an event, not an event itself.⁸⁸

NBC and ABC had similar policies emphasizing restraint. Meanwhile, many journalists took up the commission's challenge to do good. They discussed expanding their responsibilities by showing awareness of ethical and social issues; by comprehensively informing the public of violence, its causes, and effects; and by embracing "new forms" of journalism, as the task force report had suggested. These journalists were eager to demonstrate social consciousness as proof of their earnestness. The Washington Post's J.R. Wiggins argued that the task force report "greatly underestimates the amount of reexamination that is going on in the media." Such reflection made the media better problem-solvers, argued John S. Knight, editorial chairman of the Knight Newspaper chain. "As responsible purveyors of information and opinion, our newspapers are committed to the philosophy that journalism is ... an institution which serves, protects and advances the public welfare." John H. Colburn, editor and publisher of the Wichita Eagle & Beacon, was suspicious of the Eisenhower Commission's task force report, but he agreed that change was needed. "Our current social revolution," he concluded, "requires fundamental new modes of reporting, analysis and writing." Isaacs, perhaps the most visible advocate, told a group of photographers that "the degree of responsibility demanded of journalism today is far beyond anything anyone could have dreamed possible. You may already be tired of the word, but don't you dare forget it."89

Immediate Results. Journalists heeded some of the Eisenhower Commission's advice. Unlike the Kerner Commission, which prompted widespread efforts to increase coverage and hiring of minorities, the Eisenhower panel sparked few tangible, immediate results. Nonetheless, if the Kerner Commission persuaded journalists to act differently, the Eisenhower Commission prompted them to think differently. Its effect was subtle and far-reaching. By engaging with its ideas, journalists altered how they viewed themselves. For example, the commission implicitly raised journalism's stature by arguing, "In theory, the journalist is a professional and the audience is his client." The commission broadened the definition of professionalism to include a responsibility to ensure that messages are

not just clearly sent but also received. This applied positive responsibility to the basic communication process itself – and represented a "new form" of journalistic accountability. 90

Professionalism also emerged as a means of enacting positive responsibilities and helping to fill the media's credibility gap. In early 1970, Washington Post editorial page editor Philip Geyelin wrote, "Surely if three branches of government are fair game [for comment], the 'fourth branch' ought not to be completely immune, especially at a time when public criticism of the press seemed to be mounting." Kansas publisher John Colburn was gladdened that "broadcasters are concerned about our public rating on believability.... If we are to avoid a form of government control, we must better police our own house." American Society of Newspaper Editors leader Newbold Noyes agreed:

We should first count to ten while we think dispassionately about what has been said and consider whether there is any merit to the criticism. If there is, we ought to mend our ways, not because we have been frightened or bullied into it, but because we are secure enough to withstand a bit of improvement. If we are satisfied that there is nothing to his criticism, then I think, in a dignified and polite way, we should tell the critic to go to hell.... If we want the public to respect us as responsible guardians of their right to know, our best course is simply to behave as such. 92

This not might have been exactly what Milton Eisenhower and the other commissioners sought, but they had left an impression. Prompted by dramatic events and new ideas, journalists had reached a rough consensus that they should do things differently – and view themselves differently.

Developments in Journalism Ethics, 1970-1975

This study considers what three presidential commissions contributed to journalism ethics with a particular emphasis on journalists' concept of responsibility. The critiques of the Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions were followed by a flurry of activity between 1970 and 1975: the revision or adoption of codes of ethics, the formation of news councils, the appointments of ombudsmen, the founding of journalism reviews, and the hiring of minorities. In some cases, like the Kerner Commission and minority hiring, cause and effect were evident; in others, the connection was more elliptical but still palpable.

Codes of Ethics. The Warren Commission's 1964 call for a news media code went largely ignored at first. District of Columbia Circuit Judge J. Skelly Wright told a group of journalists in 1966, "It seems ... that there is still a feeling of rugged individualism among newspapermen that there should not be any agreement even among themselves to have a code of conduct." Subsequent events made the idea more attractive. As seen above, the Chicago police attacks at the 1968 Democratic National Convention and

Agnew's figurative drubbing of the news media garnered widespread approval, not outrage. In response, some journalists advocated ethics codes to bolster their credibility. "We of the press are often chided by our lawyer and doctor friends for our lack of true professionalism," said Louisville editor Isaacs. "They point out that we constitute a calling without a body of accepted or recognized standards; that we are without disciplines; and minus the powers of enforcement. These are valid criticisms." In the early 1970s, several news associations revisited their standards. In the order that they adopted or revised codes, they were the Society of Professional Journalists, the Radio-Television News Directors Association, the Associated Press Managing Editors Association, the National Conference of Editorial Writers, and the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Each is worth brief examination.

Sigma Delta Chi, founded as a journalism fraternity in 1909, had grown by the 1970s into a society of 35,000 members. It included print and broadcast journalists of all ranks. The SDX code of ethics dated to 1926, when it adopted the ASNE Canons of Journalism as its guidelines. In October 1973, the group wrote its own code and changed its name to the Society of Professional Journalists. The society's new statement emphasized responsibility, freedom, personal rectitude, accuracy, and fairness.⁹⁵

The Radio-Television News Directors Association had formal guidelines since its inception in 1946. A rewritten Code of Ethics appeared in 1966, two years after the Warren Commission's call. The RTNDA declared that members' "prime responsibility as journalists ... is to provide to the public they serve a news service as accurate, full and prompt as human integrity can devise." A 1973 revision addressed sensationalism – a persistent issue for broadcasters – by discouraging the use of terms such as "bulletin" or "flash" unless "the character of the news justifies them," and it encouraged personal decorum, particularly when covering court proceedings. These changes reflected not only the Warren Commission's concern with fair-trial rights, but also the Kerner and Eisenhower commissions' findings that broadcasts could incite violence.

The Associated Press Managing Editors Association was formed in 1933. After years of study, the APME adopted a new ethics code in April 1975. It emphasized responsibility, accuracy, integrity, and avoiding conflicts of interest. 97

The National Conference of Editorial Writers was founded in 1947 and adopted a code of ethics two years later. In 1971, prompted by an "everskeptical public" and what one member later described as "rumbles of discontent" from within, NCEW re-examined its code. A revised Basic Statement of Principles, adopted in 1975, echoed public-service themes sounded by other journalism groups and expressed the hope that "the public will appreciate more the value of the First Amendment if others are accorded an opportunity for expression." ⁹⁸

The American Society of Newspaper Editors was formed in 1922. A year later, the group adopted the Canons of Journalism, which addressed responsibility, freedom, independence, truthfulness, impartiality, fairness,

and decency. Soon after, the Harding administration's Teapot Dome scandal tested whether the society enforce its code. The crisis was sparked by *Denver Post* coeditor F.G. Bonfils, who accepted \$1 million in bribes to keep allegations out of his newspaper. In 1924, ASNE members tried to expel Bonfils but determined that they lacked the authority. Bonfils eventually quit, but the question of ethics enforcement lingered.⁹⁹ In the early 1970s, ASNE members decided to take a fresh look. "Even the title – Code of Ethics or Canons of Journalism – troubled us," wrote Mark Ethridge, Jr., who chaired a committee on the code. "There is no way, short of forming a closed shop editor's union, whereby more than 800 editors, or 1,700 daily newspapers, can be ordered to conform to a mold like lawyers and penalized for breaking that mold." A Statement of Principles was approved in 1975, with "Responsibility" as Article I.¹⁰⁰ Together, these groups' actions provide evidence that eleven years after the Warren Commission's call for a news media ethics code, it had been heeded.

News councils. The idea of a national council to hear complaints about the news media dated back at least as far as the Hutchins Commission, which recommended an "independent agency to appraise and report annually upon the performance of the press." The idea was to help journalists define "workable standards of performance," monitor minority access to the media, and investigate "instances of press lying." 101 Journalists reacted coolly, and many insisted that a council would erode press freedoms. There was similar resistance when the Kerner and Eisenhower commissions suggested, respectively, an Institute of Urban Communication and a Center for Media Study. Dayton Daily News Editor Jim Fain perceived "the Hutchins' [sic] idea, recently revived by the staff of the Eisenhower Commission, for a quasi-official group appointed by government. Any semiofficial type operation strikes me as dangerous." The editors of the Arizona Republic agreed. "We think it is better to leave the task of straightening out their errors to the newspapers themselves. We have yet to hear a suggestion for a press council that would have the authority to police newspapers without setting up the sort of censorship that is outlawed by the First Amendment to the Constitution,"102

Not all journalists resisted councils. In the fall of 1969, even the staunchly libertarian *Editor & Publisher* supported a grievance committee as a "first major national self-policing step for American newspapering." Acknowledging the implied threat of government action, the magazine continued, "the climate of the times makes it imperative for the leaders of American journalism to give this proposal serious consideration." Many lined up behind the plan. "Can anyone question that there is a real doubt in the public mind of the impartiality and responsibility of the press?" asked James Kerney, Jr., editor of the *Trenton Times*. "It seems to me that anyone who doesn't think our self-examination by our own Grievance Committee is worthwhile has lost his optimism for our glorious trade." 103

A few small communities, such as Littleton, Colorado, had experimented with media councils in the 1940s and 1950s. By the early 1970s, councils existed in Honolulu and Hilo, Hawaii; Seattle, Washington; Bend,

Oregon; Redwood City, California; St. Louis, Missouri; and Sparta, Illinois. Most operated with academic and private support. In 1971, a statewide Minnesota Press Council was organized. At the same time, the idea of a nationwide council re-emerged. Leading the charge was the ubiquitous Norman Isaacs. Mindful of the Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions, he commented, "Each time wise, thoughtful men had asked us as a profession to look into our standards and our practices[,] we had taken refuge in the First Amendment." In late 1972, the Twentieth Century Fund announced that it would sponsor a National News Council. Formed on August 1, 1973, the NNC was given a mandate to monitor the fairness and accuracy of broadcast and print coverage and to hear public complaints. 105

The Kerner and Eisenhower commissions had not envisioned binding enforcement of decisions by the press watchdogs they proposed. Similarly, the National News Council lacked punitive mechanisms. Still, it met some fierce resistance. ABC and NBC shunned the council, and Time, Inc., announced that it would not support the group. New York Times publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger declared virtual war on the council, telling Times staffers in a memo that the NNC "would function as investigator, prosecutor, and judge rolled into one." Columbia Journalism Review described "a noted academic, after participating in a seminar on the subject with several leading Times editors, told one of them: 'I came into this meeting with my mind sort of made up against press councils. But after listening to you people today and hearing your arrogance, I'm convinced that a press council may be necessary." That reaction failed to sway other prominent critics, including publisher John S. Knight, the Los Angeles Times, and the New York Daily News. 106

By the summer of 1975, National News Council Chairman Stanley H. Fuld wrote, "I foresee many problems; but none, I suggest, is insurmountable." The group was "establishing its own precedents" he hoped would take root. The council's future was finite, however. It would run out of money and fold in 1984, its death unintentionally fulfilling the Hutchins Commission's suggestion that "such a body be independent of government and of the press ... and that it be given a ten-year trial, at the end of which an audit of its achievement could determine anew the institutional form best adapted to its purposes." There was neither audit nor new form, but the council had highlighted responsibility as a national issue in American journalism. 107

Ombudsmen. The commissions examined in this study did not specifically recommend ombudsmen, but news organizations latched onto the idea as a means of achieving the commissions' goals. In-house critics provided an avenue for public accountability without the complications of news councils. A 1967 article by the New York Times's A.H. Raskin popularized the idea by proposing designated editors "armed with authority to get something done about valid complaints." Soon after, Louisville publisher Barry Bingham, Jr., appointed John Herchenroeder as the nation's first ombudsman. The Washington Post followed with a system of rotating ombudsmen. The second person to fill the job, national editor Ben H.

Bagdikian, wrote that "the idea is slightly crazy – an institution paying someone to criticize it in public." Ironically, Bagdikian quit his term early after the *Post* balked at printing one of his columns. The case illustrated the perils of ombudsmanship, but the programs continued because they maximized journalistic autonomy. They offered internal means of achieving the public responsiveness that external news councils sought. "Without exception, newspapers using some kind of ombudsman system are satisfied with the overall results," a 1973 study concluded.¹⁰⁹

Journalism reviews. The Hutchins Commission had encouraged the news media to engage in "vigorous mutual criticism." By the mid-1970s, this was a dream come true as journalism reviews proliferated. In its report,

Although many newsroom executives reported that reviews did not influence them, the publications provided forums for journalists and critics to debate ethics, including some of the ideas suggested by the Kerner and Eisenhower commissions.

the Eisenhower Commission quoted extensively from them. Best-known was Columbia Journalism Review, founded in 1961 by Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Chicago Journalism Review was launched in October 1968 in response to coverage of the Democratic National Convention. The publication investigated corruption among Chicago newspapers and broadcasters and monitored the status of minorities and women in

newsrooms. In 1971, [MORE] was launched in New York with a promise that "Spiro Agnew's monopoly on criticism of the Eastern Media Establishment is over." Regional or local offerings included the St. Louis Journalism Review, The Unsatisfied Man: A Review of Colorado Journalism, Philadelphia Journalism Review, The Review of Southern California Journalism, Hawaii Journalism Review, and Thorn: Connecticut Valley Media Review. Activists added their own reviews; typical were Inside Media (antiwar), Overload (a "radical critique") and Ball and Chain Review (by black journalists). Although many newsroom executives reported that reviews did not influence them, the publications provided forums for journalists and critics to debate ethics, including some of the ideas suggested by the Kerner and Eisenhower commissions. 110

Minority recruitment and hiring. As seen above, the Kerner Commission exerted the most direct influence on the news media. Its call for racial integration altered the makeup of newsrooms and encouraged diversity in coverage. There were problems, however: imbalances of supply and demand, creating and sustaining training programs, and concerns among minority journalists that they were "ghettoized" in their beats. The first two problems partly stemmed from the lack of financing for recruitment and training. For example, a Columbia University program funded by the Ford Foundation in the late 1960s was re-established in 1975 with a grant from the Gannett newspaper chain. Robert Maynard, then a Washington Post editor, and New York Times reporter Earl Caldwell contin-

ued the program at the University of California at Berkeley, where 120 minorities had graduated by $1979.^{111}$

Even as minority hiring efforts expanded between 1970 and 1975, many expressed dissatisfaction with the pace. In March 1972, seven black Washington Post staffers filed a complaint with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The next month, the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Minority Employment Committee found that nonwhite representation in print newsrooms was only 0.75 percent, although academic researchers' numbers - which included broadcasters - were higher. Perhaps not surprisingly, charges of tokenism abounded. ABC correspondent Mal Goode, chairman of the RTNDA's minorities committee, told the group in 1973 "that he found an increase in members employed in broadcast news, but noted there is still only a limited number of network, on-air correspondents."112 By the mid-1970s, there was a slump as journalism schools toiled to match supply with demand, initial grants ran out, or employers failed to follow up on early promises. The ASNE's Minority Employment Committee found its work fraught with frustration, and it was suspended between 1974 and 1977. Nevertheless, discussions about newsroom integration had one aspect in common: They all cited the Kerner Commission as a significant, if not indispensable, factor in prompting change.

Together, these changes were considerable. By the end of 1975, associations had revised their codes of ethics; journalists had experimented with news councils on a variety of levels; news organizations had appointed ombudsmen; groups were publishing journalism reviews; and news organizations were striving to hire minorities. The Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions had, in tangible ways, contributed to the standards and practices of journalism.

How Commission Critiques Informed Journalism Ethics

The events described here took place alongside many others. It would be simplistic to suppose that the media were hanging on the commissions' every word, but each report prompted reflection and reactions. Even journalists who strongly disagreed with the commissions engaged with their ideas, and the resulting dialogues ranged from the practical to the philosophical. At workshops, meetings, and annual conventions, in the pages of newsletters, trade magazines, and media reviews, journalists considered coverage of complex stories, questions of right and wrong, and the purpose of their vocation. It is no exaggeration to observe that many in the media searched their souls.

Two overarching ideas oriented their searching: Freedom and responsibility. The concepts provide a framework for analyzing how media professionals responded to the commissions. As seen above, most journalists zealously guarded their freedom. Their objections to codes, councils, and scrutiny stemmed from their adversarial relationship with government and tradi-

tional mistrust of external control. Accompanying this independent streak was perennial self-reflection. Ethical debates had arisen sporadically throughout the twentieth century, and the nuances of "negative" responsibility and "positive" responsibility took root in that context. 113 The Warren. Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions reinforced the freedom-responsibility duality and challenged journalists to refine what responsibility meant. Journalists inclined toward freedom feared losing their independence to various forms of authority, and their mistrust of external critics was reinforced by the fact that no member of the three commissions was a journalist. Journalists who emphasized responsibility drew from a history of public service, which the commissions acknowledged and encouraged. Between the two traditions, journalists fashioned a new approach – autonomy – that blended the two. The concluding sections will explore how this middle way was synthesized in part from commission critiques and what it meant for the practice of journalism in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Freedom

In 1957, the notion of an independent press was so engrained that Wilbur Schramm defined responsibility in terms of freedom: "Obviously, the basic responsibility of the mass media is to remain free. Their freedom must be defended against challenge from whatever source - whether from government, from ... power and pressure groups, and from special-interest forces within the media themselves."114 This tradition persisted during the 1960s and 1970s. It had vociferous defenders who were alarmed by what they saw: In 1967, Harvard professor Jerome A. Barron proposed an enforceable public right of access to the news media. Two years later, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Federal Communications Commission's Fairness Doctrine, which required broadcasters to present balanced treatment of public issues. The court rejected Barron's argument only in 1974, deciding that print media did not have to provide space for a candidate to answer criticisms. These legal developments, combined with the Nixon administration's hostility, fed journalists' fears of losing their independence. At the 1973 Sigma Delta Chi convention, President William Payette fretted about "the capacity for damage which can now be done to us by our elected public officials in this day of monster government."115

Even private entities stirred controversy, as the National News Council illustrated. Fear of authority also extended down to the level of news organizations, whose power and structure could impinge upon individuals. Harry S. Ashmore, former editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*, observed in 1970 that "group journalism is the order of the day. Only a small, and I suspect diminishing, proportion of news or commentary originates in one man's idea, executed by him alone, presented in his own words, in the context of his choosing."

Ashmore argued that the Eisenhower Commission had contributed to this unaccountable "group journalism" because psychiatrist Walter Menninger, a commission member, had supported licensing journalists. Licensure, of course, was anothema to the media, who saw it as a blatant violation of the First Amendment. Sharing Ashmore's concerns was University of Missouri Professor John Merrill, whose 1974 *The Imperative of Freedom* attacked what he saw as a dangerous communitarian trend in

journalism. Merrill believed that each journalist should decide individually which guidelines to follow. One's duty was independence, particularly amid what Merrill saw as a paradigm shift from freedom to responsibility.¹¹⁷ Because many journalists hewed to

Although the historical record is complex, it strongly suggests that the primary contribution was an expanded sense of responsibility.

the libertarian tradition, it is significant that the Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions exerted any influence on news media ethics. But perhaps things were not so simple as Ashmore or Merrill portrayed, and the middle ground between libertarian and communitarian approaches — between freedom and responsibility — was not so barren. From that ground, a new ethic of journalistic autonomy sprouted.

Negative Responsibility

Two of the questions this monograph asks are what the presidential commissions contributed to journalism ethics during this period and how they influenced journalists' concepts of responsibility. Although the historical record is complex, it strongly suggests that the primary contribution was an expanded sense of responsibility - what is referred to here as positive responsibility. To understand how it developed conceptually, it is helpful to first examine limited, or negative, responsibility. From the latter perspective, the ideal journalist would exert self-control. The chief value of negative responsibility was avoiding harm - for example, by respecting individual rights of criminal suspects or by refraining from sensationalism that could stoke the flames of violence. Of the three commissions, the Warren Commission is most closely associated with negative responsibility because it urged media restraint. Put into action, this would have ensured. for example, scrupulous use of the adjective "alleged" when referring to Lee Harvey Oswald. Similarly, the journalists cramming the corridors of the Dallas police headquarters would have complied with requests to stay back and not shout questions at the suspect. If there was a learning curve for negative responsibility, journalists seemed to advance along it. By the late 1960s, when CBS News drafted its detailed guidelines, the rules were a paragon of restraint, spelling out in detail how journalists should behave. 118 One significant aspect of the Warren Commission is what it did not suggest: legal sanctions. The chief justice was naturally familiar with several Supreme Court cases in the early 1960s that tested the limits of trial publicity, especially when disseminated by television. 119 By opting for voluntary, not mandatory, measures, the commission laid the groundwork for an expanded sense of media responsibility.

Positive Responsibility

This evolved during the course of several years. Contributing to an expanded vision were the strong communitarian impulses of the Kerner and Eisenhower commissions – leanings at odds with the journalism establishment. Positive responsibility asserted that it was not sufficient for the news media to avoid harm. Rather, they should accept a duty to improve public

Positive responsibility asserted that it was not sufficient for the news media to avoid harm. Rather, they should accept a duty to improve public understanding of problems and help to solve them. understanding of problems and help to solve them. There was evidence for this point of view in contemporaneous scholarship. Sociologist Gaye Tuchman posited that journalists managed major news events through routinization — by fitting unexpected developments into preexisting patterns. President Kennedy's assassination sent journalists into frenzy, but when the

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert Kennedy were killed in 1968, journalists had established routines to accommodate even those cataclysmic events. 120 Tuchman's analysis can be compared with the Warren Commission, whose emphasis on restraint encouraged routines to help establish order. However, the Kerner and Eisenhower commissions portrayed routines as the enemy of good journalism. It was routine, for example, to neglect African-Americans or to competitively hype coverage of violence. These two commissions urged journalists to do something different. "To editors who say 'we have run thousands of inches on the ghetto which nobody reads' ... we say: Find more ways of telling this story," the Kerner Commission exhorted in 1968. A year and a half later, the Eisenhower Commission promoted "new journalistic forms," arguing that "after events are reported, something more is required – opinions, analysis, solutions."121 All three commissions emphasized the good of society in general terms. Had they stopped at that, their influence on journalism ethics would likely have been far smaller. By suggesting specific actions - sketching out visions of how journalists should work and think of their work - the commissions helped establish specific standards.

Between Freedom and Responsibility: Autonomy

This monograph also asks if journalists changed their practices or standards in response to the commission. The evidence regarding code revisions, news councils, ombudsmen, minority hiring and journalism reviews indicates that they did. Conceptually, many did so in the middle ground between freedom and responsibility. As journalists synthesized libertarian and communitarian traditions, they created a blended ethic of autonomy. Staunchly independent but oriented toward social good, the ideal autonomous journalist was self-disciplined, self-governing, and responsible in a positive sense – that is, seeking to explain, solve problems, or possibly even advocate on behalf of the disadvantaged. Earlier assertions of journal-

istic autonomy - from the concept of the Fourth Estate to the reformist campaigns of the muckrakers – had a social orientation. What distinguished the new ethic of autonomy was an overt invocation of positive duty. This was prominently enshrined in the codes of ethics written or revised in the early 1970s. "We believe in public enlightenment as the forerunner of justice, and in our Constitutional role to seek the truth as part of the public's right to know the truth," read the introduction to the 1973 Sigma Delta Chi code. 122 The codes of the Radio-Television News Directors Association, American Society of Newspaper Editors, and Associated Press Managing Editors all began with sections labeled "responsibility." Journalists responded to the Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions' criticisms by taking ethical responsibilities into their own hands. For example, autonomy explains why journalists rejected the Kerner Commission's Institute of Urban Communication and the Eisenhower Commission's Center for Media Study but supported ombudsmen and a proposed grievance committee. The first two proposals came from outsiders, but the latter were journalists' own doing. Summarizing this attitude, St. Petersburg Times editor Donald K. Baldwin said, "We should do the job ourselves." 123

The early 1970s represented an exceptional time in American history and American journalism. It was a high-water mark of the mass media, when relatively few outlets spoke to huge national audiences. "The power of the press in America is a primordial one," Theodore H. White wrote in 1973. "It sets the agenda of public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law." Autonomy meant that journalists would observe some restraints – but that they would be self-imposed. 124 The idea remains compelling today, when the orientations and standards of "the mainstream media" have become part of national political debate. Recent court proceedings against celebrities like O.J. Simpson, Kobe Bryant, and Michael Jackson have rekindled the "free press-fair trial" debate. Although numerous news outlets have exercised little restraint, the norm of negative responsibility has resonated with others. At the same time, the industry has suffered a rash of journalistic fabrications, which in 2003 led The New York Times to appoint its first "public editor" – an ombudsman. Meanwhile, state and regional news councils have maintained a presence, with two new bodies formed in 2006. Finally, civic journalism, though far from a universal trend, is positive responsibility by another name. 125

In 1947, the Hutchins Commission report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, reflected a dualistic view of news media ethics. Journalism was one coin with two faces: freedom and responsibility. For half a century, scholars have recounted the Hutchins Commission's role in the development of twentieth-century journalism ethics but failed to acknowledge the substantial contributions of the Warren, Kerner, and Eisenhower commissions. They help to explain not only discrete developments like ethics-code revisions but also the complexity of ethical debates, which reflect a blend of traditions, norms, and ideas. Informed by the commission's criticisms, journalists have not split along simplistic, exclusive paths of freedom or responsibility but have followed a middle way: serving society by their own rules.

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