form their own views, perhaps even provoked by an absurdly controlled state media, but they are not free to have those views expressed and aggregated by the political heuristics through media outlets that typically give public opinion common meaning and power.

Response to W. Lance Bennett's Review of *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia*
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— Ellen Mickiewicz

Lance Bennett is rightly pessimistic about a state with government-run mass media, on the one hand, and unchecked corruption, on the other. The massive and partially acknowledged corruption operates menacingly at all levels of society, a phenomenon mainly of the post-Soviet period. And the situation is bound to worsen as the economic crisis grows. However, it is unlikely that this decade of rampant corruption is the source of most heuristics that Russians use, for the derivation and content of shortcuts to navigate news tend to be drawn from early experiences under Soviet rule.

Bennett's response is accurate in its understanding of the work done by Russian viewers to make sense of messages, but his understanding of Russians' store of heuristics is circumscribed, perhaps because he has drawn mainly from American applications. Soviet-era-derived heuristics are very widely in use there and have some powerful results. One such heuristic, in which Russians viewers appear more sophisticated than American counterparts, is the trade-off. Americans require prodding to consider it. Russians *expect* trade-offs, and if there are none in a news story, viewers supply them—a dozen or more. A second heuristic born in the Soviet era is the weakness of a "positive" news story. Positive stories lack credibility both with college graduates and viewers who have not gone beyond high school.

Election stories were universally detested in the groups, Viewers want coverage to show candidates' programs for the future and accountability after the election. They see all election stories over time and from local to national offices as the same incomprehensible bare-knuckle brawling.

Bennett notes the broad spread of opinions across the groups and that is a valid observation, as is his conclusion that the prevention of a more public opinion is a goal of the regime, something more openly and viciously imposed during the Soviet years. Yet in my book, there is a striking example showing a type of public opinion with no apparent formal organization. In polls in the 1980s, voters choosing the ballot line "against all" were rural, older, and with little education. Now, they are more young, urban, and at upscale jobs. Since 1997, "against all" votes received more than all but four parties, and in almost one-third of the single-member districts came in first or second. Even Vladimir Putin's pick in St. Petersburg was forced into a runoff. This mounting protest vote ended when the state Duma, led by the party favored by the president, removed the against-all ballot line in 2006 and abolished single-member constituencies.

Russians are graduates of the Soviet school of life. That life was supposed to be uniform throughout the country. Of course it was not, but the commonalities across a vast area and large population were such that it is not surprising that their heuristics were related to those many generations of experience.

When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina. By W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 278p. $22.50 cloth, $15.00 paper.
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— Ellen Mickiewicz, *Duke University*

It takes a vacuum for the American mainstream press to seize an opening to perform its vital role. And it takes a crack in what the authors portray as an edifice of official secrecy, lying, intimidation, and retribution for the mainstream press to do its job—holding public officials to standards of accountability.

W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston have written an accessible, valuable, and thoroughly cogent study of the American press during one of the most critical times in the history of the country. It is appropriate for academics, their students, and anyone who wonders why coverage of our foreign policy appears to be so close to the government's version. *When the Press Fails* convincingly displays the logic by which the elite press ceded its power, integrity, and mission as watchdog *voluntarily* to an administration bent on taking the country to an ill-advised war based on knowingly faulty evidence. With stories in the papers aligned with official policy, it was thus impossible to offer a counterframe—a strong challenging interpretation or characterization.

Framing research is a productive approach to the study of mass media, and it has been well applied to research about foreign policy by Robert Entman (*Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy,* 2003). Equally helpful is indexing research, developed by Bennett himself, which has provided the theoretical framework for studies of other wars. Jonathan Mermin, for example (*Debating War and Peace: Media Coverage of U.S. Intervention in the Post-Vietnam Era,* 1999), found the press similarly ordering its stories in light of government policy.

The chief players in this book are those who hold power and "the mainstream press [which] sets the tone for public discourse even though peripheral outlets often contain a diversity of competing and often more encompassing information" (pp. 58–59). Myriad sources of information surface

in other media outlets, but they are essentially recycled stories broken by the mainstream press; television and blogs may add a sea of commentary, but in gathering and analyzing news, they are not even close to the mainstream press' influential elites and insider sources. Because of its command of the institutions of coercion and vast apparatus of communication, the government in a democracy requires continued close scrutiny and accountability. The press in a democratic society can fulfill its watchdog function of holding power accountable by providing *other frames,* finding and pursuing other stories that challenge the rationales of the powerful, and investigating every piece of such stories. What Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston lament is the almost effortless way in which the mainstream press abandoned fidelity to this calling during the Bush years, culminating in its submissive coverage of the run-up to the Iraq War.

During Hurricane Katrina, the administration was caught off guard. This was the vacuum into which the press rushed; the administration was either on vacation or caught without its usual, effective spin factory at work. And it was in the coverage of this story that accountability journalism came back: Enterprising journalists communicated their knowledge, their hard-hitting independent analysis, and their powerful visuals on location. Yet after this solid, original reporting that clearly resonated with the public, official Washington recovered, and its interpretations again dominated the mainstream press.

Daniel Hallin's work (*The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam,* 1989) has shown how important it is when the press can identify counterstories in the breakdown of consensus in the administration. From initial support of the administration, the press's watchdog function with respect to the conduct of the Iraq War was activated when members of the administration took issue with one another, leading to high-level resignations; when the front was available to the press and with it stories of demoralized soldiers; and when the home front was deeply divided, without the fear and tragedy of 9/11 to unite it.

When the story of U.S. military treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison broke, the discourse of "torture" spread quickly. The Bush administration responded immediately, determined to reduce this episode to mere "abuse." The authors present content analysis of news and editorials, in which Abu Ghraib was the focus, in the *Washington Post* from January 1 through August 1, 2004, and on the *CBS Evening News* between April and September. These two sources were expanded by searches of a sample of 10 national newspapers between April 2004 and the first week of January 2005. The team of authors tested whether or not the torture label or the administration-preferred abuse label was used. The findings reveal that downgrading from "torture" to "abuse" had been widely accepted by the press. The administration, in other words, had succeeded in its rhetorical campaign.

It is not as if the press offered no alternative perspectives; the investigative work of Seymour Hersh, for example, was but one notable exception. But the point of Bennett and his coauthors is that these other frames challenging the prevailing administration's view had no "legs." The government's efficient spin factory took over the shape of the story and marginalized alternative frames.

Chapter 5—"Managing the News: Spin, Status, and Intimidation in the Washington Political Culture"—shifts from content analysis to focused interviews, resulting in "firsthand accounts of various players, including journalists, public relations consultants, and news sources" (p. 133). These players frankly acknowledge the pull toward consensus journalism in the capital, as journalists and consultants clamored to access inside sources and, indeed, to become insiders themselves.

It seems clear that the very foundation of investigative journalism—the norm of professional, unbiased mining of the range of sources and perspectives—has been ignored on several recent occasions, resulting in lawsuits and public apologies by newspapers. In spite of FBI material to the contrary, the major media put out one-sided stories that irresponsibly set their sights on Richard Jewell (Atlanta Olympics bombing), Wen Ho Lee (data taken home, leading to charges of spying for China), and Mark Hatfield (anthrax case).

Why is it that the press receives the brunt of the blame in this book? Democracy in the United States, at least in theory, should have other robust institutions, most notably the legislative branch and a reasonably informed public, to hold the executive accountable and to enable the public to be aware of stories that differ from the administration's account. Such stories will be essential, in theory, for public deliberation. But the authors pay relatively little attention to the public. They accord it little knowledge on which to base informed policy that furthers their interests. This, too, may occur because of the failure of the press. How to characterize the American public is a critical issue for democratic theory. The literature on citizen competence is split. A number of scholars argue that a public uninformed about proposals and candidates can calculate what they need to know to vote their preferences (e.g., A. Lupia and M. D. McCubbins, *Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?*, 1998). The studies in political psychology by Doris Graber (*Processing Politics: Learning from Television in the Internet Age,* 2001) find that it is not only formal education that characterizes the public's ability to process news but also experiences that, if acquired while young and spring from emotion, significantly enhance the capacity of memory and the availability of heuristics.

On the other hand, such heuristics may be faulty, and therefore the message sent by the vote may give a false impression of the voters' preferences. Much depends on the information environment. As Paul Sniderman writes,

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"Citizens do not operate as decision makers in isolation from political institutions. If they are in a position to overcome their informational shortfalls by taking advantage of judgmental shortcuts, it is because public choices have been organized by political institutions in ways that lend themselves to these shortcuts" ("Taking Sides: A Fixed Choice Theory of Political Reasoning," in *Elements of Reason,* 2000).

The credibility of the American press system, as the authors point out, has plummeted in the eyes of the public. If the lack of an independent spirit is one source of this perception, another is the media's failure to insulate itself from a business model that long ago began to emphasize commerce at the expense of journalism. Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston's *When the Press Fails* presents a sharp analysis and strong critique of the extreme measures taken by the George W. Bush administration to tame the press, from the spinning of the news to threats, intimidation, and career-ending personal attacks. What is less clear from the book is whether or to what degree the Bush administration is typical or an outlier. There is no doubt that insider status will always exert a powerful force of attraction for reporters seeking sources; that government officials will routinely request that media outlets voluntarily delay a story in "extreme" situations; and that the journalist-source nexus is always in danger of becoming unbalanced. What the authors identify is something much more ominous: a virtual monopoly on the framing of foreign policy by administration officials, aided and abetted by a subservient mainstream press.

If Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston continue this work, it would be interesting to see foreign policy framing power in a different administration and a press in such straitened circumstances that "mainstream" itself may eventually be a fleeting term. It is unlikely that whatever parts of the circle of today's elite newspapers left standing will be able to produce a flow (or stream) broad and compelling enough to define authoritatively for the country as a whole THE principal stories, while somehow overcoming the increasing tempo of fragmentation of publics and the proliferation of their choices.

Response to Ellen Mickiewicz's review of *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina*

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— W. Lance Bennett

Ellen Mickiewicz has done an excellent job of presenting the key elements of our argument and empirical analysis about why the mainstream press proved incapable of independent news framing at critical junctures in the Iraq War. She then raises a series of excellent broader questions: What about the responsibility of government institutions to hold those in power accountable? What about the independent force of public opinion? Were earlier administrations as able to spin the press as successfully as the Bush administration? Each of these questions might well fuel a book. I can only address them briefly in this response:

The responsibility of government institutions. The U.S. government has many provisions for holding those who abuse governing power accountable to law and, sometimes, even to standards of sound judgment. Yet it is clear that politics often comes into play in decisions about whether public officials discipline wayward colleagues. Despite calls for the Obama administration to investigate possible Bush administration violations of laws against torture, the new president has been reluctant to spend time and political capital on such consuming investigations. Self-serving considerations drove the narrow investigative scope set by the Bush administration when the Abu Ghraib scandal first broke in 2004. One might ask where the Democrats were at that point. Once again, political calculations led a then-weakened party to avoid torture as an election year issue against a still-popular president. The main point of our book is that when politics undermines government accountability mechanisms, it also undermines the mainstream press, whose basic operating principle depends on a well-functioning opposition for its own capacity to sustain another side to the story.

What about the independent force of public opinion? It would be nice to think that public opinion might discipline governments in matters as removed from personal experience as foreign policy and distant wars. However, Mickiewicz answers her own question by pointing out that the heuristics used by publics in these matters tend to be provided through official cues repeated often in the media. When the range of official cuing shrinks, as it did in decisive moments in the Iraq War, the press impact on public opinion comes close to a propaganda operation, rather than a mechanism for public deliberation.

Have other administrations received similar deference by the press? The short answer here is yes—in cases when the political opposition was weak or politically sidelined. Recall the battle cry of the new Republican movement after the shattering defeat of 1964: charges that the liberal press was biased toward the Democratic view of things. In a way, the Republicans were right at the time, but only because they were so convincingly out of power that journalists did not have another reference for indexing another side for many national political stories. The Republicans, of course, have continued to score points with this rhetorical line, even when they later dominated the news. The point is that other administrations have been shown undue deference by the mainstream press whenever journalists could not recruit a credible official counterpoint to keep another side of the story going. That is how indexing operates to undermine the independence of the American press.