

Selective Bias in the Collective Memory of News Public Opinion and Reflections on Governance: The Case of Watergate Scandal

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Abstract. The Watergate scandal is one of the most disgraceful political scandals in American history, and its impact on the history of the United States itself and on the international press as a whole has been lasting. Indeed, the American press, represented by the Washington Post, played a pioneering role in exposing the Watergate scandal. In this context, media journalists showed a clear bias towards collective memory choices. On the one hand, in the face of strong government pressure, journalists continued to report the facts and to uncover the truth with objectivity, truthfulness and accuracy. On the other hand, as the years passed, the media's understanding of the Watergate scandal updated and changed, and collective memory did not remain unchanged. For contemporary China, the prominence of the press in fulfilling its role as a watchdog over the government leads us to reflect on the ability of the media, journalists and civil servants to carry out their duties.

Keywords: Watergate; Collective memory; Social governance.

1. Introduction

All The response to the sudden public events represented by the COVID-19 outbreak that ravaged the world has been the subject of intense academic debate and reflection. In recent years, the unpredictability of public emergencies has posed a huge challenge to journalism (Yang, R., 2021). The level of competence of journalists and the selective bias of public opinion towards reporting can have a huge impact on public thinking. Guided by years of practice, the US government's press release system has gradually played an important role in the US government's foreign contacts, in defending its interests, in defending the values of American democracy and freedom, and even in shaping the government's image. According to Fangli Dang (2014), when unexpected events occur, the US government is able to disclose the facts and reveal the government's policy direction in a timely manner, playing an irreplaceable role in controlling the direction of public opinion, stabilising all parties in society and controlling the overall situation.

In considering the experience of the US government and the US media in public health emergencies, it is important to note that, as mentioned in *Discovering the News - A Social History of the American Press*, the US press has never had such a rich, wide-ranging and far-reaching landmark as the Watergate scandal. Watergate was a political scandal exposed by the US government in 1972 - illegal activity in the presidential campaign - when five men were arrested for storming the Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate building in the early morning of 17 June 1972. At the time, most of the news media portrayed the incident as a pre-election partisan riot and reported it as a minor story not worth mentioning. However, a preliminary investigation by The Washington Post revealed suspicions that Republicans had tried to plant a wiretap device inside the Democratic Party. Two reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, were assigned to investigate the matter. They were professional journalists who kept digging for the truth, gathering evidence and uncovering it step by step. The impact of this story was so great that Nixon became the first and only president in US history to be removed from office in the midst of a scandal.

Regarding the definition of collective memory, Zhou Haiyan (2014) argues that collective memory is a social behaviour in which people acquire collective memories from society and at the same time communicate these collective memories with other individuals or groups in society and gain recognition. In addition, Habwach (2002) defines collective memory as "the process and outcome of sharing past events among members of a particular social group". In the case of Watergate, collective memory can be used as a tool to reconstruct the historical image of each era and to reflect the dominant ideology of society. Depending on the dominant ideology of each period, and in particular the way it reacts to public emergencies, these can shed some light on the governance of government today and the relationship between government power and public opinion.

It is essential to note that memory is not static, but is constantly being reconstructed in its current context. It is the result of selection. In this essay, therefore, I will look at the biased coverage of the American media and our media response to Watergate in the context of what we have learned in class. What do these choices reflect about the characteristics of American government governance, and what do they tell us about governance today.

2. Watergate Brief

2.1 The basic story of Watergate

In 1972, the year of the US presidential campaign, the ruling Republican President Richard Nixon set up a presidential re-election committee chaired by Mitchell, who planned to wiretap the Democratic Party's campaign at a Republican Party meeting in March 1972.

On 17 June of the same year, police arrested Republican operatives involved in wiretapping and filming the Democratic Party's campaign headquarters offices in the Watergate building in Washington. Subsequently, the media reported on the Watergate wiretapping and revealed that the White House was involved. The incident caused an uproar in the United States. However, on 7 November 1972, Nixon was re-elected president by a wide margin, and in February 1973, the US Senate set up a special investigative committee to look into the case, of which Irving was the chairman. In May 1973, the US Department of Justice appointed Cox as a special inspector to investigate the Watergate wiretapping.

Since then, the White House and Nixon's campaign committee have been investigated by various departments and organisations. And, as the investigation progressed, the national media became involved in exposing the Watergate scandal. At the same time, calls for the president's impeachment came to the fore. The New York Times published its first editorial calling for Nixon's resignation from the presidency. In July 1974, the House Judiciary Committee voted to impeach the President and passed three articles of impeachment. Nixon was forced to resign from the presidency as a result of the Watergate scandal, known as the "Watergate scandal".

The Washington Times' relentless pursuit of the Watergate scandal led to the downfall of the Nixon administration. In this political game, journalists were able to stand up for their principles as journalists. They won the battle between the press and the US government, and firmly established the importance of the press to the US government.

2.2 Memorable scenes from the Watergate scandal

Throughout the incident, the American press remained committed to "journalistic professionalism". Journalistic professionalism, which began to take shape in the late 19th century, is a philosophy of journalism that is independent of any authority. (Niu Yanhua, 2010) In the context of appealing to audiences and promoting transformation, the American press has developed into the dominant discourse for explaining and judging journalism, with the principles of American democracy, empirical science and citizens' willingness to reform as strong motivations. In the Watergate scandal, journalists played up the demand to capture 'authenticity'.

Xiong (2020) argues that journalism evokes the Watergate scandal, mainly by using the Watergate scandal as an example to discuss American journalistic practices or ideas, to articulate the views of

American journalistic ideas, and to discuss Chinese journalistic practices by drawing on the discursive resources in the Watergate scandal. In addition, there are two main types of scenarios in which the Chinese press remembers the Watergate scandal: first, when major stories about the Washington Post and Watergate-related newsmakers are reported, at those moments the Chinese press publishes corresponding reports or articles to honour or remember them. Secondly, when there is a crisis in Chinese journalistic practice, articles are published to evoke the former Watergate scandal and to clarify the boundaries of journalistic practice.

The memory of the Watergate scandal can be divided into the following stages, 1972-1974, when the content of the investigation of the incident dominated. The memory of the investigation of events in this period falls into two categories, with the investigation focusing on the events and the people involved. Thereafter, a cooling-off period occurred, spanning the years 1975-1999. Nixon and his wife retired from public life, after which Nixon wrote six books about the president in the hope of redeeming his Watergate tarnished reputation. However, the shadow of the Watergate scandal remained over him until his death in 1994. The 21st century has seen a period of extended news coverage (2000-2017), with 21st century coverage falling into three main categories: the deaths of key figures, the emergence of new information and the birth of new issues.

2.3 The intertwining of the US government and the news media

In fact, the media in the United States is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. The American press developed an early tradition of scrutiny and criticism of the government. However, at an earlier time, the American press was dominated by a war of words between political parties, most notably the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties. During this period, newspapers were not only vehicles for capital, but also acted as political appendages.

According to Goychen (2019), memory is an ever-changing and active process that includes the process of forgetting and the process of recalling. In this process, memories are intentionally or unintentionally deleted, blocked, streamlined, transformed or even fabricated, creating memories that do not exist in the original experiences and texts. The Watergate scandal exposed the weaknesses of campaign finance, with a succession of money laundering, secret financing and funding cuts that put large sources of funding at risk. Behind the wiretapping, theft and political intrigue was the money issue, and on 3 May 1973, the Washington Post devoted an entire A1 page to the campaign finance issues behind the Watergate scandal.

In addition to this, the Watergate scandal also sparked a media focus on lawyer self-regulation. According to the New York Times, the Watergate scandal prompted lawyers in 10 states to conduct self-policing investigations in the legal profession. Collective memory is formed through constant unfolding, shifting and transformation. During the explosive period of the Watergate scandal, the news formed memories focused on the above: the break-in investigation, the wiretaps, the level of involvement of Nixon and his aides, the credibility of the president, bipartisanship and public opinion in the general election. Over time, the media selectively removed some of these memories and the finer points of the investigation were ignored, including bipartisanship and the next election, which was seen as a major event at the time. In particular, reports of money laundering and secret funds were forgotten in subsequent years of coverage.

Memories were selectively removed from the media and, as a result, the issue of campaign finance did not feature in the collective memory of the Watergate scandal. New information was added more in the regulations that followed the birth of Watergate, which evolved from a figurative representation of President Nixon's improper access to campaign intelligence within the Democratic Party to an abstract political-type scandal with the president as its primary target. In general, the news is a quick representation of the experience of each historical moment, and much of it focuses solely on its own vivid day. Precisely because it is a report on its own day, it is a permanent message about that day and not about any other day.

Newspapers, periodicals, radio, television and the new media constantly refresh their information content, just as an individual's short-term memory produces immediate impressions, feelings and ideas, and then new information fills in while the old disappears into the vastness of social information.

3. The impact of Watergate on US politics

Watergate gave rise to political terms that are still used today, such as "Saturday Night Massacre" and "So-and-So's door". As the Watergate hearings revealed, the discovery of the existence of tapes from the recording system installed in the White House changed the investigation forever. For the first time, Nixon was in the spotlight as an individual in a scandal. The tapes were soon subpoenaed by Archibald Cox, the Watergate special prosecutor, and Nixon refused to comply with the subpoena on the basis of executive privilege.

The Watergate scandal was an iconic event of the twentieth century, no less significant to the American people than the Second World War, the Vietnam War or the civil rights movement. The term is associated with political intrigue, power cover-ups and the play between politicians and the law, and is the only event that has led to the resignation of a US president. As the events unfolded, some details faded, but Watergate as a whole is remembered by idealists among government officials in a grassroots movement. Watergate was a watershed event, not only in the realm of the press, but also in the realms of politics, society and popular culture. Watergate ended an era and ushered in a new one. The Watergate scandal had a negative impact on the legal profession. Many of the participants in the scandal were lawyers, and nearly 30 of them are facing some kind of legal action. The landmark significance of Watergate can be seen in the fact that in August 1974 Ford, who took over as President, told the American people in his first speech after Nixon's resignation that "our Constitution works" and that "this is a place where the people rule".

This event has long been a part of American social life, particularly in the executive sphere. It did not end with Nixon's resignation from the presidency. On the contrary, it is seen as one of the most serious struggles between the "rule of law" and the "rule of man" since the founding of the United States. It triggered a profound rethinking of administrative ethics among American citizens, scholars, and the government and Congress, and directly contributed to the construction and study of administrative ethics in the United States. In *Control of Communication: Media Propaganda in the U.S. Government*, Shen Guolin mentions: "After a century or two of development, the U.S. government's media propaganda has become very mature and experienced, and has a set of proven strategies and methods, they can use the news sources at their disposal to control by releasing or not releasing news, and they can also control through their relationship with the media oligarchs. "control when necessary".

4. Summary

4.1 Reflections on the Watergate scandal for contemporary Chinese governance

The difference at the heart of the Chinese and Western media is in fact the difference between the media dominated by the ruling power in China and the media dominated by the capitalists in the West. While it is true that in the above analysis we mentioned that the media has an important regulatory role in relation to the government, the mission of the Western media is mostly decentralised and individualistic. The idealism pursued by these individual media practitioners is hardly centralised and therefore often fragmented.

Chinese media, on the other hand, are mostly created by the party and the government and are governed by the government (Yuan Xiang, 2014). They have a bridging relationship with the people, conveying the mission that the state has entrusted to the people, and pushing the society towards goodness and beauty. Although the Chinese media does not dominate the world as much as the Western media does, it has pushed for progress in reform and opening up and called for people to contribute to the country's renaissance. For the Chinese press, the Watergate scandal is certainly not

just a saga across the ocean, but these stories will also 'cross the ocean' and relate to issues and journalistic practices facing the Chinese press or industry. As the commercial profitability of journalism does not conflict with state ideology, the discursive practices surrounding the commercial significance of the Watergate scandal can extend beyond the circles of market-oriented media practising journalistic professionalism to include the voices of practitioners from a richer range of traditional media types, including political party media. The memory of Watergate becomes a symbol, linked to the present, constituting a new narrative resource through which traditional media can leverage their brand value and escape the crisis of profitability.

China is an ancient civilisation, and in ancient times China was known for its moral rule, which is why our traditional philosophy is called moral philosophy. In the new era of socialist construction, China has made great strides in building a democratic political system, while actively promoting innovation in government management and drawing on the advanced experience of developed countries to make up for its own shortcomings. Among them, the moral development of civil servants has also been greatly developed. However, while we are aware of our achievements, we should also be aware of the shortcomings in the development of civil service ethics. Compared with developed countries, we still have a big gap and many problems. We must look at this issue in a dialectical manner.

"The impact of the Watergate scandal is worldwide. It has triggered a worldwide rethinking of civil service ethics and has contributed to the prosperity of administrative ethics. The appropriate measures taken by the United States to deal with the Watergate scandal have had a positive impact on the construction of administrative ethics in China, and have provided profound inspiration for strengthening the construction of administrative ethics in China. During the period of social transformation, China's administrative team has made certain achievements, but there are still many problems and shortcomings, and the experience of administrative ethics construction in developed countries has profound inspiration for the professional ethics construction of China's administrative team. The construction of professional ethics of the administrative team is a systematic project consisting of legislation, education and supervision. We must strengthen the construction of ethics regulations and speed up the education and training of administrative personnel in ethics while adhering to the premise of unshaken guiding ideology. We must improve the supervision mechanism, which consists of internal party supervision, administrative supervision, legal supervision, public opinion supervision and mass supervision. In response to the Watergate scandal, what we need to do is to learn a lesson and improve our own quality while handling our relationship with the media, treating the media as the mouthpiece of the Party and the state and making every media worker a watchman of society.

4.2 The Watergate scandal and the handling of public emergencies in China

Since its establishment in 1982, China's government spokesperson system has been slow to develop and has been groping its way across the river. It was not until the outbreak of SARS in 2003 that 67 press conferences were held from April to June of that year to inform the public about the development of the epidemic, which marked the full establishment of the press spokesperson system in China.

As the crisis unfolded, the Chinese government's press release mechanism was challenged as never before. The outbreak of the New Guinea epidemic in 2020 was particularly contradictory, but we can see that the Party and the State handled the situation well compared to SARS, leading the Chinese people to win the battle against the New Guinea virus and become the only major economy in the world to maintain positive economic growth in 2020. The application and practice of communication principles in the US government's response to the Watergate scandal in breaking crisis news releases provides us with the following insights and lessons. According to Fangli Dang (2014), first of all, the press release must change its concept, respect the public's right to know, and understand the important role of the news media. In addition, it is necessary to respect the laws of communication and make good use of communication technology in order to achieve the best communication effect. Most

importantly, the press release system must be adapted to China's actual situation, taking the best from it and removing the worst, and actively learning from the experiences of other countries.

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