This article explores the “video-malaise” thesis, which asserts that a combination of negative political coverage by the press and exposure to the media lead to political cynicism at the grass roots. Data from the 1996 National Election Study and a 1997 Pew Research Center poll show that the traditional video-malaise notion needs to be revised. Jaundiced views of government and of the media co-vary, raising the possibility that the public views both government and the media in the same vein.

Many observers of the recent Clinton impeachment debate worried that the events would further undermine support for our institutions. Such concern is reasonable given recent history. Trust in the national government has declined precipitously since the mid-1960s. In 1964, for example, 76 percent of the public said they trusted “the government in Washington to do what is right” “just about always” or “most of the time,” while 22 percent said “only some of the time” or “never.” By 1996, the comparable figures were 32 percent and 68 percent. Polls conducted for the Pew Research Center in 1998 and 1999 reveal almost no change in Americans’ trust in the national government since 1996 (Pew Center 1999).¹

Researchers have offered several explanations for declining trust in government: Vietnam, social disorders, dissatisfaction with government policies, economic woes, value changes, Watergate, and lesser episodes of official malfeasance in the nation’s capital (Craig 1993; Norris 1999b; Nye et al. 1997). None by itself can explain waning public trust since the mid-1960s, and even collectively they do not satisfy.

Another putative explanation for rising cynicism focuses on changes in media coverage of public affairs. Some argue that the press used to cover politics and politicians favorably.² Then, during the Vietnam War, journalists began to evaluate critically the conduct and assertions of elites. Journalistic careers flourished when reporters put politicians in the dock at the court of public opinion, and Watergate epitomized this phenomenon. One consequence, according to this theory, has been increasing cynicism among ordinary people.
Inundated by negative information, many people may have concluded that all politicians were corrupt and self-serving and that the political process was beyond the public’s control.

Michael J. Robinson was one of the first scholars to publicize the link between negative press coverage of politics and rising cynicism among the public (1975, 1976, 1977). Borrowing the term *video malaise*, Robinson argued that a combination of the themes television used to portray politics, and the type of person most likely to rely on TV news, undermined trust in government. Americans’ increasing reliance on TV for political news since the late 1950s was disturbing, for “the greater the dependency upon television, the greater the person’s . . . estrangement from government” (Robinson 1975:101; see also Robinson 1976:430).

Writers have explored video malaise or “media malaise” many times (see, e.g., Becker and Whitney 1980; Becker et al. 1979; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Chan 1997; Fallows 1996; Kerbel 1995; Lichter and Noyes 1996; McLeod et al. 1977; A.H. Miller et al. 1979; Norris 1996, 1999a; Patterson 1993; Ranney 1983; Sabato 1993; Zikin 1981). As Stanley Rothman puts it, “Public cynicism . . . [is] growing in the United States and, in so far as journalists have played a role in this growth, they . . . contribute to the erosion of the very cultural elements which created a free society” (1996:62).

This article explores the argument that reliance on media coverage of public affairs is related to cynicism in the United States. The article’s primary goal is to specify the relationship between media exposure, attention paid to media coverage of politics, views of press fairness, and political trust. We cannot sort out causal relationships due to data limitations, but cross-sectional survey data allow us to examine these connections in a multivariate environment. The data come primarily from the 1996 National Election Study.

The relationship between public opinion about government and the media is not well understood. Those who ascribe political cynicism to media coverage must account for the tendency for Americans’ views of government and the media to co-vary. Attributing waning trust in government to media coverage of politics accords the press too much influence over public opinion (see also Schudson 1995). Still, as we shall see, views of government’s trustworthiness are associated with people’s perceptions of media fairness.

**Theories of Video/Media Malaise and Opinions about the Media**

Two sets of research concerning public opinion about the federal government and the media have emerged. The first is Robinson’s video-/media-malaise thesis, which asserts that “themes” (Robinson) or “frames” (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) used by the media to portray public affairs have contributed to rising cynicism among the public. Larry J. Sabato writes that “especially in the post-
Watergate era . . . , the press is perceived as being far more interested in finding sleaze and achieving fame and fortune than in serving as an honest broker of information between citizens and government” (1993:2). Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson argue that the media’s style of political coverage stresses conflict and strategy in ways that contribute to a “spiral of cynicism” (1997).

The second body of research has focused on changes in Americans’ views of media credibility and fairness. Although there seems to be a consensus that at least since the 1970s, the public’s confidence in the media has declined, researchers are at loggerheads on a key point, namely, the association between the public’s trust in government and its views about the media. Some authors, such as Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, believe that there is a negative correlation between views of government and the media (Lipset and Schneider1987; also see Gergen 1984; Schneider and Lewis 1985). As trust in government goes down, trust in the media rises, and vice versa. Other writers, such as Michael Robinson and his colleagues, believe that press criticisms of public officials result in waning trust in the media unless there is a “conviction” that concludes the media trial (Robinson and Kohut 1988; Robinson and Ornstein 1990; also see Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Fallows 1996; Fitzsimon and McGill 1995; Sabato 1993).

General Social Survey data from 1973 through 1996 suggest some support for Lipset and others’ argument in the 1970s, but little support in the subsequent period. Confidence in Congress, the press, and television clearly tend to move downward together. Confidence in the federal executive fits the pattern less clearly, but statistical evidence confirms that it, too, has moved downward in association with the other three.7

The evidence for video/media malaise is slim: a few experiments and several cross-sectional surveys showing a correlation between exposure to the news and negative views of government. Arthur H. Miller and his coauthors persuasively linked newspaper content and political trust, but they lacked measures of television content (1979). Cliff Zukin asserted that “the question of whether the mass media contributed to the growth of political malaise . . . probably will never be satisfactorily answered” (1981:382). Zukin believed that unraveling historical trends and overcoming methodological problems were virtually intractable.

It is possible, however, to explore the relationship between Americans’ trust in government and their views of the media, particularly television news.8 This can be done in ways that cast useful light on the video-malaise thesis.

**Public Opinion about the Media**

Before investigating the connections between media variables and trust in government, we first look at how people view the different types of media. This analysis will deepen our understanding of later findings about trust in govern-
The 1996 National Election Study (NES) and the February 1997 Pew Center poll contain items measuring what people think about media and news organizations. The Pew Center poll is better for this analysis because it has a wider variety of media measures, though fewer political variables than the NES.

Using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, we tested four models, each with its own dependent variable. The Pew Center poll asked about respondents’ opinions (very favorable to very unfavorable) about particular types of media, including national and local television news, nationally influential newspapers, and the respondent’s daily newspaper. Given more positive views of local news, we wished to distinguish support for local and national, print and broadcast news, which the Pew items permit. We suspected that the results would vary according to a news medium’s type and proximity.

For each of the regression models, the independent variables included standard demographic items such as age, education, family income, race, sex, and partisan identification. Media-usage variables included the frequency with which the respondent watches shows like *A Current Affair*, *60 Minutes*, local newscasts, and nightly network newscasts, as well as the frequency with which the respondent reads tabloids and local newspapers. The importance of media exposure to an individual is tapped by items that ask how much the respondent enjoys watching television news and looks forward to getting a daily newspaper. Measures of media fairness included the respondent’s perception that news organizations get facts straight and that news organizations deal with political and social issues fairly and the respondent’s opinion about investigative reporting. To save space, the results of these analyses are not presented, but a quick summary follows.

Turning first to significant factors that influence opinions about large, nationally influential newspapers, opinions are shaped by an enjoyment of watching television and a belief that news organizations generally get the facts straight and deal with social and political issues fairly. The better educated are also more likely to express favorable opinions. Those likely to express a more unfavorable opinion of national newspapers were male and more frequent viewers of *A Current Affair*.

Showing some similarity to the model for national newspapers, opinions about a respondent’s daily newspaper are more positive if one looks forward to reading the daily news and believes that news organizations deal with the facts straight. Less favorable opinions about local newspapers are evident among the better educated, those with higher family income, and regular readers of tabloids.

Opinions about local television news echo some of the patterns above. More favorable opinions were offered by those who enjoy watching and are more frequent viewers of *A Current Affair*, *60 Minutes*, and local news programs. They look forward to reading their daily newspaper and are sanguine about the ability of news organizations to get the facts straight. The better educated and those with higher family incomes are, again, more unfavorable.
Finally, favorable opinions about network television news are more likely to be in evidence among those who believe in the capacity of news organizations to be fair and to get facts straight. A sense of enjoyment in watching the news also contributes to favorable opinions. Unfavorable opinions are more likely to be expressed by the better educated, Republicans, and older respondents.

Despite our expectations that the predictors would vary according to the outlet, the factors that shape media perceptions do not vary greatly across the media. A sense of enjoyment or anticipation in consuming news, along with some faith in the accuracy and fairness of news organizations, were significant for print and electronic media in national and local venues. These findings reinforce the need to understand the impact of perceptions of media fairness on opinions about government. Will those with a reservoir of faith in media institutions be more inclined to express favorable opinions about government? Better-educated respondents had more favorable opinions of large, nationally influential newspapers but less favorable opinions of network news, local news, and their own newspaper. When the tabloid media did reach statistical significance, the relationship was negative, lending some support to those who argue that the tabloid media undermine perceptions of the media.

These results raise an intriguing question: Is there an underlying dimension for trust in major societal institutions, where the media as the fourth estate have become comparable to government institutions in the public’s eye? General Social Survey data from 1973 to 1996 buttress this notion. Now we turn to the connection between media usage and trust in government.

**Public Opinion about the Federal Government and the Media in 1996**

The 1996 National Election Study contains a variety of measures that can be used to explore the relationship between trust in government and opinions about the news media, particularly TV news. Perhaps the NES’s most valuable asset is the four-item measure of trust in government, an indicator that has been widely used (W.E. Miller et al. 1980:257–59). The items include a general query about how often people trust the federal government, another question probing how much individuals think the government wastes tax monies, a third measuring perceptions that the government is run either on behalf of all the people or a few big, selfish interests, and the fourth asking respondents to report on their sense of government officials’ honesty. The four items were combined to form an indicator of trust in government that ranges from very trusting to very cynical. The four-item Trust in Government Index has a Cronbach’s coefficient alpha of .59 (Zeller and Carmines 1980:56–60).

The 1996 NES also included variables tapping exposure to media coverage of politics. Respondents to the preelection wave were asked how many days in
the week before they were interviewed they had watched the early evening news programs on television, watched local TV news shows, and read a newspaper. Responses to each variable ranged from 0 to 7.

The 1996 NES’s postelection wave also had seven questions plumbing exposure to entertainment television programs: Jeopardy, sports programs, ER, Frasier, Dr. Quinn, Friends, and Prime Time Live. These variables tap a mix of exposure to game shows, sports programs, situation comedies, drama, and so-called magazine shows. The seven were combined to form an Entertainment Television Exposure Index, which has an alpha coefficient of .39. Scholars argue that exposure to entertainment TV shows affects Americans’ political views (see, e.g., Comstock 1980; Gerbner et al. 1982, 1984; Meyrowitz 1985; Robinson 1977; Zukin 1981). Analyses in the previous section established that infotainment programs and tabloid readership affected an individual’s orientation toward various media. Thus an effort to analyze media exposure’s impact on cynicism should include an indicator of watching entertainment television programs.

Public opinion researchers know that measures of media exposure miss something important, namely, the amount of attention people pay to stories about public affairs when reading or watching the media (see, e.g., Chaffee and Schleuder 1986; Price and Zaller 1993). The 1996 NES included several variables probing respondents’ reports of how much attention they pay to political news. For example, immediately or shortly after the three news media exposure items described above, the NES asked respondents who had replied that they relied on the medium to report how much attention they paid to news about the 1996 campaigns. The postelection wave contained two questions asking respondents how much attention they paid to news about the presidential and the congressional election campaigns. The postelection wave also asked if people listened to political talk radio shows and, if they did, how much attention they paid to talk about politics on these programs. This gives at least some purchase on the impact of “new” media on trust in government (see Davis and Owen 1998).

The 1996 NES’s postelection wave had an item asking how much respondents trusted the media to report the news “fairly.” The item had five categories: “just about always,” “most of the time,” “only some of the time,” “almost never,” and “none of the time” (which was volunteered by a small portion of the respondents).

The 1996 NES also included a wide range of variables known to affect political cynicism: partisanship, ideology, education, gender, race, family income, perceptions of family financial fortunes in the past year, and whether respondents thought government’s economic policies helped or hurt their family’s financial situation. The role of partisanship and ideology in shaping political cynicism is well known (see, e.g., Citrin 1974). Although education is a weak indicator of political sophistication (Luskin 1990), following James A. Stinson (1975), it is included in this analysis. Income, the best indicator of SES, and perceptions of trends in family finances and opinions about government eco-
nomic policies are important predictors of trust in government (Weatherford 1983, 1984). Finally, the preelection wave contained two items based on Morris Rosenberg’s “Faith in People” scale (1965). The items asked if respondents thought that people could be trusted or that they could not be too careful in dealings with others, and if people would try to be helpful or if they would try to take advantage of others. The two-item “Misanthropy Scale” had a Kuder-Richardson KR-20 coefficient of .63. Robert Putnam contends that waning faith in people is part of declining “social capital” (1995a, 1995b) and that, as we shall see, lack of faith in others affects trust in the media’s fairness and views of government’s trustworthiness.

**Predicting Trust in Government in 1996**

Three OLS regression equations were estimated on the 1996 NES. In each, the four-item Trust in Government Index was regressed on a set of predictor variables. In the first OLS regression equation, the predictors include exposure to local TV news, exposure to national TV news, and exposure to a newspaper, the seven-item Exposure to Entertainment TV Index, a two-item measure of attention paid to media accounts of the presidential and congressional campaigns, and how much attention people pay to politics when listening to talk radio programs. In the second OLS regression equation, the original six predictors were retained, and the variable tapping how much people thought they could trust the media to report political events fairly was added. The third equation retained the seven predictors included in the second equation and added party identification, ideological self-placement, gender, race, education, family income in 1995, a measure of the respondent’s perception of her or his family’s financial fortunes in the last year, the variable tapping opinions about how personally helpful the federal government’s economic policies had been, and the two-item Misanthropy Index. The results of the three OLS equations are shown in Table 1. The table depicts each predictor’s unstandardized regression coefficient, its standard error, corresponding T-value and level of statistical significance, two indicators of model fit (the adjusted R² and standard error of the estimate), and the number of cases on which the equation was estimated.

Note that media-exposure variables are never significant predictors of trust in government. Robinson may have been correct at one time, but arguments that mere exposure to television—be it news or entertainment programming—conduces political cynicism miss the mark. Thus the data buttress Pippa Norris’s (1996) assertion that Putnam (1995a, 1995b) wrongly believes exposure to TV news per se corrodes positive opinions about the political system.

However, the data do offer initial support for the belief that attention paid to media accounts of politics—whether in the traditional or “new” media—are related to one’s level of cynicism, but in different ways. As Model 1 shows, the
Table 1
OLS regressions of trust in government index on selected predictors, 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>s.e. b</td>
<td>T =</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to campaign in media</td>
<td>–.333</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>–5.83***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment Media Index</td>
<td>–.010</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>–0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local TV news exposure</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National TV news exposure</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper exposure</td>
<td>–.014</td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>–0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to politics on talk radio</td>
<td>.196</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>2.96**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in media fairness</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>Ideology</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Race</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances in last year</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government economic help</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misanthropy Index</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.E.E.</td>
<td>(1,493)</td>
<td>(1,490)</td>
<td>(1,060)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: University of Michigan’s Center for Political Studies’ 1996 National Election Study.

*p = .05, **p = .01, ***p = <.001.

more attention people say they pay to news about the campaigns, the more trusting they are of the national government. On the other hand, the more heed talk radio’s audience pays to politics, the more cynical they are.

To understand better the press’s relation to cynicism, we need to consider how much people think they can trust the media to report public affairs fairly. Recall that those who are most sanguine about the fairness of local and national media are more likely to view those media favorably. That done (in Model 2), we note that trust in media fairness is significantly related to trust in government. The less people believe in media fairness, the more cynical they are about the national government, and vice versa. Moreover, with opinions about media fairness added to the OLS equation, the only remaining significant predictor is level of attention to media coverage of the 1996 campaigns. The association between the talk radio variable and cynicism is epiphenomenal.
The most important data are in Model 3. Once education, gender, race, partisanship, ideology, family income, economic perceptions, and faith in people are added as predictors of trust in government, the only media-related variable that remains statistically significant is trust in media fairness. Thus to comprehend properly the relation between the public’s media behavior and attitudes, one needs to be concerned with people’s perceptions of media fairness. This may seem a truism, and yet this finding is remarkably absent in most accounts of the connection between the press, the public, and political discontent.

It is also noteworthy to observe the importance of people’s perceptions of their recent family finances and their opinions of how helpful government economic policies have been. If Americans believe that their family has suffered financially lately, and if they do not think government economic policies have benefited them, they tend to be politically cynical.

The data in Model 3 also demonstrate the importance of general faith in people (Rosenberg 1965). Those who believe that their fellow humans tend to be altruistic are more likely to trust the national government than those who take a dim view of other people’s motives. Again, this proposition may seem almost tautological, but exploration of this connection may open new paths to understanding the reasons why faith in the federal government has fallen during the last four decades. It may also be that dispositions such as faith in people, belief in media trustworthiness, and trust in government and their opposites stem from a common source, a tendency either to take a jaundiced or benign view of the social universe. Linkages between the three dispositions need further study.

Finally, as the indicators of model fit show, none of the three models is very satisfactory. At best, less than a fifth of the variance in the Trust in Government Index can be accounted for by the combined effects of trust in media fairness, perceptions of financial fortunes, opinions about government’s impact on family fortunes, and general faith in people. Neither party identification nor ideology is a statistically significant predictor of trust in government. Nor are the SES indicators: gender, race, or education. Perhaps if we were to follow Arthur H. Miller’s advice and construct a measure of policy dissatisfaction (1974; A.H. Miller and Borrelli 1991), ability to predict scores on the trust index would improve. Perhaps the model is misspecified by assuming linear and additive effects. Undoubtedly, measurement error saps predictive strength. Still, it is important to note how little impact media exposure and attentiveness variables have on cynicism.

Conclusions

We have explored the link between media exposure and perceptions of the media with trust in government. If video/media malaise exists, people who were exposed to more news would be more cynical, which does not occur. However, attitudes toward the media are related to political trust.
Understanding the relation between media coverage and political trust is fraught with methodological difficulties. A considerable corpus exists that demonstrates more critical coverage of government and politics, but that does not prove that the coverage caused declining trust. As shown in Model 3 of Table 1, exposure and attention to news are not associated with political trust. However, this fails to establish that the coverage does not contribute to declining trust. For example, if the negative tone of coverage were so pervasive as to be universal, we would not find variation between outlets to measure, but we would expect that greater exposure would be associated with greater cynicism. However, we also are unwilling to dismiss the effects of such critical coverage. As demonstrated in various ways, perceptions of the media are linked with perceptions of government. Their fortunes have declined together. This could represent the decay of something more fundamental that affects people’s general trust in society, but it also might represent the mutual destruction of government officials and the media. As they attack and criticize each other, they pull down evaluations of themselves and related societal institutions. In this way, media malaise would help to explain the connection between evaluations of the media and assessments of government. Those who credit the media for souring the public’s views of government miss an important point: The average person is not a passive vessel into which the media pour political “themes” or “frames” (see the essays in Crigler 1996). Many people are remarkably indifferent to the media’s political coverage; others react to public affairs news on the basis of their opinions about press fairness.

The time has come to take a more nuanced view of the relationship between the public’s opinions about the media and political cynicism. General Social Survey and Pew Center data show that confidence in government and confidence in the press are positively associated. The 1996 NES suggests that if people believe that the media do not fairly cover the political fray, they take a critical view of government’s trustworthiness. Thus perceptions of the media and of the government may rise and fall together. This may reflect a broader trend: that support for institutions in general has changed. It may indicate the emergence of the media as another power broker and thereby an institutional power in the eyes of the public. Such a judgment by members of the public may lead them to view the media through the same lens that they view government.

Long ago, Martin Trow wrote about a cluster of views—which he dubbed “nineteenth-century liberalism”—that was hostile toward the national government, big business, and organized labor (1958). (Trow sought to show how that cluster enhanced support for McCarthyism among a sector of society, a topic very different from ours.) Could it be that, in America today, a cluster of attitudes includes government and the national media? Our data cannot prove the cluster’s existence, but they are suggestive, especially if we were to find that negative views of large institutions are also rooted in misanthropic views of humanity.
We have found, as have others, that the unvarnished version of the video-malaise hypothesis—that is, the greater the exposure to TV, the greater the distrust in government—lacks support. A different take on video/media malaise holds that what matters is not general exposure to the media, or to the news, but exposure to entertainment media. In this argument, greater exposure is associated with greater distrust. Contrary to some earlier American work (cited above) and recent European studies (Holtz-Bacha 1990; Newton n.d.), we find no support for this proposition. This may well be due to differences in national culture and media settings or in the measurement of entertainment media exposure. As Christina Holtz-Bacha notes, a fuller explanation of the entertainment media–political distrust hypothesis probably resides in content analysis of particular programs and outlets. Those who consume more entertainment media are likely to know less about government (Rhine et al. 1998). Perhaps what people do not know, they do not trust. The question of the impact of entertainment media consumption should remain interesting as more people turn to these media and away from news.

If there is an underlying dimension that causes trust in different institutions to rise and fall together over time, our findings—though cross-sectional—suggest that it resides neither in socioeconomic status nor in media exposure patterns. People’s perceptions of institutions’ policies may matter most, as in our findings regarding perceptions of trust in media fairness and of the helpfulness of government policies. The role of reliance on particular media outlets, and changes in reliance patterns over time, require fuller exploration.

What shapes these perceptions, if not the media? The answer is beyond our reach, but at least two related arguments merit consideration. First, rising standards of living and economic security may encourage people to be less likely to defer to authorities, be they government or media. Second, the bar of public expectations for institutions and their leaders may have been raised over time (Inglehart 1997). In either case, scholars will be well advised to take a more sophisticated view of the nexus between exposure to the media and political cynicism than the video-/media-malaise thesis.

Notes

A revised version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 15–17, 1999. We wish to thank Pippa Norris and three anonymous reviewers for helpful suggestions.

1. General Social Surveys from 1973 through 1996 reveal that the share of the public having “great confidence” or “some confidence” in the executive branch of the federal government declined from 88 percent to 57 percent, while the percentage having “great” or “some confidence” in Congress fell from 74 percent to 52 percent.

2. “Objectivity” has been the standard press stance since the end of the muckraking era (Schudson 1978), and that may account for an absence of negative political coverage before Vietnam.

4. Some writers argue that the mass media buttress established institutions in capitalist societies (W.L. Bennett 1996; Edelman 1988; Ginsberg 1986; Guzzardi 1985; Paletz and Entman 1981; Parenti 1993) and that journalists have frequently allowed political leaders to escape responsibility for their misdeeds (Entman 1989). We concentrate, however, on the video-/media-malaise thesis.

5. We also make some use of a poll conducted for the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in 1997 and the 1972–1996 General Social Survey (GSS) Cumulative File. The National Election Studies (NESs) are conducted by the University of Michigan’s Center for Political Studies and are distributed by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). The Pew Center made its data available to us. We wish to thank Director Andrew Kohut for help in obtaining the data. General Social Surveys are conducted by the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center. The ICPSR distributes the data. We are indebted to Mark Carrozza for help in obtaining the 1996 NES and GSS data. We are responsible for all analyses and interpretations.

6. The 1996 GSS shows positive correlations between a measure of confidence in the leadership of the press and indicators of confidence in the leaders of “the executive branch of the federal government” \( r = .29 \), “the Congress” \( r = .34 \), “the Supreme Court of the United States” \( r = .35 \), and “the military” \( r = .24 \). The 1996 NES finds that trust in government and people’s reports of how often they trust the media to report the news fairly correlate at \( r = .31 \).

7. Partial correlations for GSS data from 1973 through 1996 show significant positive relationships between confidence in the executive and the legislature, on the one hand, and confidence in the press and TV, on the other. These data also indicate that the press suffered the greatest overall decline in public confidence for the period, followed—in order—by television, Congress, and the federal executive.

8. Because a considerably larger percentage of the public claims to rely more on TV than on newspapers for political news, we are not unduly discomforted by the measures available in the 1996 NES.

9. An alpha coefficient of this value indicates that respondents vary a good deal in the types of TV entertainment programming they watch. If the goal were to create a unidimensional scale, an alpha coefficient under .4 (for seven items) might be problematic. However, because the goal is to create an index that taps how much people souse themselves in entertainment TV fare, the Exposure to Entertainment Television Index can be useful.

10. Can a measure of heed paid to campaigns be a surrogate for attention to public affairs in general? Although not a perfect match, the two overlap (see, e.g., S.E. Bennett 1986). Thus we use the campaign-attention variables as surrogates for attention to public affairs.

11. The first item is Morris Rosenberg’s “Scale Item III,” while the second is an adaptation of his “Scale Item V” (1965:309–10).

12. KR-20 is identical to coefficient alpha when all items in an index or scale are dichotomous (Zeller and Carmines 1980:58–59).

13. Although the OLS model makes stringent demands on the data, multiple regression is a robust data-analysis technique (Cohen and Cohen 1983) and can be profitably employed with the 1996 NES.

14. The first asked how much attention respondents paid to media accounts of the presidential campaign. The second asked how much attention respondents paid to media stories about the congressional campaigns. The index ranges from 2 (“no attention”) to 10 (“a great deal of attention”) and has a coefficient alpha of .75.

15. Gender and race are dichotomies, coded 0 and 1. Partisanship is indexed by the Survey
Research Center’s standard seven-category measure (see W.E. Miller et al. 1980). Ideology is tapped by the seven-point self-placement variable introduced on the 1972 NES (W.E. Miller et al. 1980). Education is the last year of formal schooling respondents claim to have completed. Family income in 1995 is recoded to the NES’s category midpoints. The variable asking about family finances in the last year has three categories: gotten worse, remained about the same, and gotten better. The question asking for opinions about the government’s economic policies also has three categories: made things worse, didn’t make much difference, and made things better. The Misanthropy Index has already been described.

16. The Lewinsky scandal and Clinton’s impeachment trial have had an interesting fallout for the press. Except for a brief period after Clinton admitted to “an improper relationship” (Morin 1998), polls have shown high levels of public negativity toward the press (see, e.g., Pew Center 1998). The first Pew poll after the Senate voted not to convict Clinton showed strong approval of Clinton’s job performance, substantial doubts about the media, and continuing lack of trust in government (Pew Center 1999).

References


“Video Malaise” Revisited


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