Introduction

On October 15, 1868 the Detroit *Free Press*, a Democratic newspaper, reported:

> The Democracy of Shiawasee county assembled *en masse* at this place to-day and raised a magnificent hickory, something over one hundred feet high, and all pronounced it the handsomest pole that has been raised in this section of the country. After getting it raised and properly secured a magnificent streamer thirty feet long, bearing the names of our glorious standard bearers, [Presidential candidate] Seymour and Blair, was hoisted to the breeze, when cheer after cheer was sent up as the flag unfurled and these names, which are synonyms of liberty and equality, floated at the top of the pole . . .

Political culture in the second half of the nineteenth century was pervasively partisan. Despite hour after hour of political speeches dissecting the issues of the day, election campaigns were more than duty.[1] Notwithstanding the torchlight parades, the raising high of the hickory pole, and the barbecue of whole oxen, campaigns were more than diversion. Election ceremonies offered an opportunity for American voters to display their commitment to a political community, a political party.

The *Free Press*, like other daily newspapers, participated in these rituals of political belonging. As official state paper of the Democratic Party, the *Free Press*'s political advocacy extended well beyond the publication of a list of endorsements on elections day, as our contemporary press is wont to do. Indeed, partisanship was a public and ubiquitous phenomenon that defined the very essence of nineteenth-century American journalism. Endorsements were not for individual candidates, but for entire party slates without exception. And, the paper publicized its choices day upon day for weeks before the election, as a sort of special badge of honor. Editorials naturally rung with the rhetoric of forthright political stands. Indeed, the majority of opinion pieces argued the party's cause, defending its policies from all criticism by unprincipled opponents. News reports too were hardly exempt from partisanship and reflected in important ways journalism's public mission.

The individual journal was the organ of the partisan political community, and charged with the task of articulating the community's ideas and expressing its interests. In their prouder moments such journals could claim to have enriched American democracy. Journals enhanced the public's attention to social issues and people's sense of political involvement. In their darker days, such journals ruthlessly suppressed and distorted the news, letting the interests of politicians ride roughshod over any open reporting of vital issues.

In the early twentieth century, however, journalism in Detroit as in other American cities broke its historical ties with the Republicans and Democrats. No longer "official organs" of the party, they disavowed their past exuberant, political journalism. No longer faithful partisans, Detroit papers cast a cool appraising eye when judging the news value of the speeches of politicians. And then the words were usually discounted, marked down as of limited value, consisting solely of the debased currency of political speech.

At this time, newspapers elaborated a new occupational ethic and reconstructed their political role in the public arena. The press, journalists pledged, would be governed only by a rigorous ethic of impartiality and public service. The daily paper should represent only the general public in reporting and investigating the news, not particular political interests. The press changed from being a strenuous advocate and ally of the parties to a formally neutral and independent medium of public communication for, ideally, a whole range of political voices. In its new impartial guise, the press gave up much of its right to express a political viewpoint, to inject into the news its own sentiments and evaluations. Politics no longer held pride of place in the daily columns, and journalism dispensed with the partisan passions that had imbued its narratives with excitement and drama.

This book explores changes in the political role of the American press from 1865 to 1920. Over the course of these fifty-five years, journalism fundamentally altered how it reported on the words and deeds of politicians. How did this shifting political stance of the press, I ask, affect the way American citizens perceive and participate in politics? What accounts for such transformations? And how can the tools of social science – most particularly political and cultural sociology – help us to understand these dynamics of change? Against specifically economic, cultural, and professional explanations, this book argues for a political interpretation of journalism's permutations. Both press and polity should be understood in tandem as institutions of the "public sphere." Both are contentious partners in America's public debate with

all its disputes over what is and what should be the proper ordering to the nation.

Politics of the press

Today's news media assert that they are independent of all direct political ties. Journalism, they say, is quite unencumbered by any guiding political beliefs, obligations, or allegiances; the press selects its news according to autonomous criteria of journalistic importance. Despite this appearance of formal autonomy, however, the media's selections and interpretations are not a matter of a free choice by the free press. The fourth estate of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this book argues, is quite weak and easily overpowered by rival political powers. Indeed, the press is inevitably entangled in the debate of the public arena and influenced by the political powers that be. Contextualizing the press within the public sphere – with its distribution of resources and legitimacy among diverse public speakers – reveals the nature of, and constraints on, reporting.[2] It helps account for the media's relative subordination in defining the news agenda. More generally, it explains the press's public pose, whether it be as avid partisan advocate, effaced neutral recorder, or impartial expert analyst.

For the press always possesses a political dimension. Three main factors account for this inescapable, if subterranean, politicization of the news. First, in constructing its daily quota of news narratives, the press aspires to present a formal, authoritative account of the day's most important words and deeds. The media transform private events into public affairs and suggest these reports are worthy of the nation's attention. Society in some sense accepts the importance and centrality of these news stories. As a "cultural focal point" that in part defines our reality, the news inevitably becomes a crucial "symbolic resource" for politicians: an object warranting their close attention and concern.[3]

Second, political groups may differ with the press over the accuracy of the news. They may deny the validity of the press's descriptions, denounce their analyses, and impugn their motives. Or, at least, the politician, the public relations agent, and the citizen's advocate realize that other news reports with alternative spins would serve their purposes better. They know that more favorable press coverage can be obtained by assertions of injury and unfairness, in sum, by heaving a few criticisms in the direction of the press. Consequently, the interpretations of reporters necessarily come into conflict with other public or political organizations.

Third, journalism lacks any of those special attributes which might shield it from external critics.[4] Unlike other professions, reporters cannot boast of any formal credentialed training, nor specialized technical knowledge, nor an esoteric occupational language. Journalism vends its wares in the public arena and misses all those professional traits which might grant it an exclusive authority to depict our social world. Furthermore, the press confronts other public speakers – most notably the President – who have their own legitimacy, their own mandate to define what is important and true about our social reality.

In sum, journalism confronts rival public authorities and is unable to establish any technocratic justifications that would allow it to report the news free from external criticisms. The news media do not stand above the battles and debates that animate American public discussion. Rather, they are inevitably embroiled in the contentions of the public sphere. Threatened by attacks on its credibility and its centrality, the press responds. To ensure the acceptability of its news reports to both the mass public and elite alike, the media draw upon the norms of the broader political culture and accede to the views and voices of "legitimate" political representatives in the public arena.[5] In this manner, politics fundamentally influences the news – both in the specific selection of events for coverage and in journalism's definition of its highest professional ideals.

The democratic public sphere and the press

The press flourishes and, in fact, survives only in the democratic public arena. What is this "public sphere"? "At the root of all politics," declares E. E. Schattschneider, "is the universal language of conflict."[6] But only in the modern era is conflict accepted as a central part of the definition of politics. Only in the "Democratic Age" is a social space created for the permissible expression of opposed points of view and interests. This arena of conflict, this "public sphere," with its lack of automatic identity among truth, power, and law, involves the articulation of a new normative political project and political identity for society.[7] In this normative project, no prime minister, president, or king is permanently entitled to control political office or to wield the power of government. No social group is considered automatically to hold the truth. Rather, the truth and power of democracy derive from the permanently open and revisable deliberations of public opinion. Ideally, into this open space of democracy, into this public discussion, all citizens can freely enter as equals, propound their perspectives, and participate in the formation of a political consensus. No *a priori* fixed views or privileged speakers

establish the correct policy. Instead, the better argument should triumph over mere social power.

The social space in which public opinion forms is the "public sphere." Jürgen Habermas in his classic study, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, explains that in a crucial, minimal sense the public sphere emerges "in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body."[8] With this conception, Habermas rooted modern democracy in civil society, below the summits of formal political power. This defining down of politics allows modern representative democracy to escape the restrictions on participation and deliberation that would necessarily ensue if discussion was confined to formal governmental institutions. Such institutions, with their scarce resources and their limited time to reach decisions, necessarily exclude the mass of the population. Instead, in civil society, in the public sphere, these limits do not obtain.

Classical democratic theory proposed that the policies of government should reflect this more general process of deliberation in the public arena. Congress or Parliament's legislation, like public opinion in general, was to follow from the better argument of what was right, and not just from momentary, fluctuating power balances: *Veritas non auctoritas facit legem* – Truth, not the arbitrary authority of the ruler, makes law. Between government and society there was not to be just a top-down, one-way, flow of power and speech. Rather, parliament's deliberations would also be guided and informed by the issues and reasoned perspectives raised in civil society.

This concept of a public sphere – an open, multi-sided, popular discussion aimed at consensus – was institutionalized in the formally democratic state through enumerated rights. Its autonomy was guaranteed by rights of freedom of speech and assembly. Its power over government was ensured by universal suffrage and by rendering governmental decision-making public and open to scrutiny by citizens and their representatives.[9] The politicians charged with implementing the consensus elaborated by public opinion were to exercise power in accordance with the law and in a transparent manner.[10]

The press was supposed to play a crucial role in this ideal model of democracy, and indeed journalism has historically been central to the viability and vitality of public discussion. As Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out a century and a half ago, the press remedies the problems of political communication in modern mass society. When democracy expands from a small polis to a nation-state, the exchange of opinions and information can no longer be encompassed by face-to-face conversation. Instead, the press assumes the crucial role of bearer of political

discussion among citizens separated by vast geographical, and also social, distances.[11] Furthermore, Habermas and others have detailed how the press crucially fought for the rights of the public. In the US, as in Europe, journalists contested the secrecy of the national legislature as well as the government's censorship of public discussion.[12]

But we do not need to rely on Habermas or even the earlier de Tocqueville to recognize the press's preeminent place in democracy's deliberations. For in manifold ways the press as an institution of the public sphere is directly inscribed into our legal–constitutional system – from the First Amendment with its mandate for press freedom to economic privileges that are specific to journalism because of its political status, to "shield laws" that permit the news media to keep their sources confidential in judicial proceedings.[13] Society bestows upon the media special rights, and in turn expects them to accomplish a difficult political task: the press should facilitate the citizens' exchange of ideas and information without compromising the public sphere's classical ideals of openness and equality among participants.[14]

Social histories of the American press

This is journalism's public mission. It would of course be naive to accept at face value the press's claim to fulfill these eighteenth or even twentieth-century ideals. Despite all their democratic aspirations, the news media do not respond to the needs of all citizens equally, they do not permit all members of the public to enter the public sphere as represented in their columns and pages. In addition to responding to the public sphere's ethic of equal, open communication, the press is an economic entity, a political resource, and a cultural product. The nightmare forces of power, profit, and ideology often intrude upon journalism's democratic dreams and disturb its commitments to serve the public without fear or favor.[15]

In fact, across time and from country to country, the press has promoted the ideals of the public arena in markedly diverse and contradictory ways. It is the curious trait of past historiography, however, to provide only an extremely limited perspective on the diversity and alterations in the politics of the press. Historians appear to possess only a few crude conceptual tools with which to elucidate media transformations. Change is often taken for granted, turned into a quasi-biological process of natural evolution, or ascribed to one or two inevitable forces such as increasing modernization or commercialization of the media. Overwhelmingly, historians ignore the role of such social variables as power and culture in the constitution of the news. Similarly the outcome

of change is conceived in simplified, dichotomous terms of a "free" versus "controlled" media. In this manner, the variable ways in which the media enhance or inhibit democratic discussion are lost, and the actual social construction of the news is neglected.[16]

The case study offered here aims to remedy these defects. Between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, the American press fundamentally refashioned its mode and manner of facilitating democratic discussion. A consideration of this change will reveal the alternative ways in which the press functioned within the public arena, and the principles of their variation. But first it is necessary to reflect upon the insights and inadequacies of past historical accounts of this journalistic revolution.

Progressive historiography

Every historical age creates its own paradigm of historical understanding. In the triumphant reign of each paradigm a new image of the polity and the press is normally produced. In the early twentieth century, Progressive historiography depicted journalism as having evolved through a sequence of stages towards political independence and objectivity. By the early 1900s, the fourth estate supposedly freed itself from the contaminating influence of government, political parties, and "the (commercial) interests."[17] In the typical metaphor of the period, the press was seen as maturing, becoming a machine. The press grew into a bureaucratic corporation. Yet this new, controlling "iron cage" guaranteed the press's freedom, not its servitude. The dictates of the market, a complex division of labor, and professionalism – in sum, modernity – purportedly imposed a sobriety, impersonality, and impartiality upon the journalistic trade. As a manifestation of their new complexity, daily newspapers eliminated the arbitrary authority of individual partisan editors, whether in their pose as political propagandists, moral crusaders, or just plain eccentric characters.

The press thus achieved freedom from both corrupting external powers (political parties, corporations), and capricious internal powers (the partisan editor, the capitalist owner).[18] The press's evolution towards truth and independence presumably culminated in an ideal endpoint – expert news personnel freely pursuing their specific journalistic function in autonomous organizations. Instead of a biased, personal organ serving interests, journalism supposedly became a professional public service assisting American democracy with unbiased information and impartial analysis.[19]

This Progressive account is dismissed by Michael Schudson as a form

of "natural history." Typically natural history presents a descriptive chronology of events without thematizing the causal factors that resulted in one specific outcome instead of another.[20] The Progressives portrayed the press as an unfolding organic form that follows its own internal, teleological path of development towards press freedom. Journalism's relationship to its environment – the variable forms of political institutions and culture – is left unquestioned.

Baldasty's economic history of the news

Gerald Baldasty's recent volume effectively inverts the Progressives' natural history of American journalism. Yet, although his *The Commercialization of the News in the Nineteenth Century* is the latest synthetic account of the growth of newspaper independence, it is in many ways a classical account. It merits our attention, beyond its evident insights, because Baldasty largely expresses the conventional wisdom on press changes. He argues that indeed, across the span of the nineteenth century, journals steadily dispensed with their original partisan commitments and advocacy. This advancing movement, according to him, reflected not the purification of the press from political control, but a new brand of corruption. Rather than fulfilling its democratic duties, the Gilded Age press became ever more addicted to the profits offered by a mass audience and advertisers. Baldasty elaborates the familiar theory of transformations in nineteenth-century journalism as the product of increasing "commercialization." His achievement is to turn this received wisdom into a clear, systematic, and thoroughly documented account.

For Baldasty, an early partisan press was supported largely by the patronage payoffs of parties. In the middle decades of the century, propelled by visions of new-found wealth and increasing capital investments, publishers traded in the limited party patronage for the bountiful commercial revenues offered by advertisers. By the waning years of the 1800s, daily sheets "usually eschewed close political affiliation" and were largely autonomous.[21] In Baldasty's theory, news content and indeed "journalistic visions" followed from this funding mechanism. And this commercialization dictated one result: a depoliticized news that addresses its audience as consumers, not citizens.[22]

Baldasty richly details the changed fundamentals of the newspaper business. His is the most substantiated narrative yet of the shifts in managerial strategies, newspaper organization, and market constraints affecting the journalistic enterprise. But in his simple reversal of Progressive history Baldasty largely reproduces its straightforward,

deterministic account of the news. Culture and power are largely (if not entirely) missing in his history. [23] His attention remains steadfastly on the sources of funding for the news business. As he succinctly writes,

> The intimate connection between finances and content figures prominently in the changing nature of the press during the century and was central to the rise of commercialized news . . . [W]hen advertisers came to replace political parties as the key constituent (and financial angel) of the press, the press came to support them, too. These two constituencies, first political parties and later advertisers, were instrumental in defining the news. Both helped shape the news to reflect their own needs and interests.[24]

Baldasty can blithely ignore culture and politics because he inadequately analyzes how economics influences the conduct of journalism. His assertion of a "simple interplay of money and content" is too simple. He ignores the ambiguities of a market-oriented press and bluntly juxtaposes it to a politically funded journalism. As my chapter 2 argues in more detail, markets do not automatically expel press partisanship. A concern for profits will not necessarily exclude political advocacy. Indeed, in certain market contexts, and given popular attachment to parties, newspapers which publicly proselytize for a party may well gather more subscribers than ostensibly independent papers. This capacity of a profit-driven press to maintain its partisan stance reflects, in part, the different ways that politics and economics affect the content of journalism.

While a concern for either profit maximization or power accumulation may impair the press's service to public deliberation, power and profit inflict their injuries in different ways. Politics, we may say, constitutively enters into cultural works, whereas economics only makes their production and distribution highly dependent. Politics is directly concerned with reshaping journalistic content for persuasive propagandistic purposes. The politician wishes to mold the reader's political convictions. A profit orientation is only secondarily concerned with the message of the news; commercial publishers desire first and foremost to sell the journal to readers and, then, to peddle readers' attention to advertisers. The news is molded to attract the readers' interests and concerns (and with an eye on the bottom-line). This recasting of journalism may entail stories of celebrities and scandals, and even a fictionalization of the news, but not necessarily. *Depending* upon the cultural expectations of readers and the structure of the market, the news may or may not respond to democracy's need for diverse, critical perspectives and reliable information.[25]

In this context, Baldasty's intensified inspection of journalism's commercialization insufficiently captures the social forces shaping American

journalism at the end of the twentieth century. It fails to explain the press's continued attention (however diminished) to politics and the particular form this coverage takes. In general, Baldasty's delineation of the growth of commercial concerns provides a forceful, but ultimately inadequate, portrait of press politics in the waning years of the Gilded Age.

Schudson's Consensus history

Michael Schudson's *Discovering the News* endures as the standard social history of the American press, in part because of its succinct overview and probing analyses. Against Progressive historians' description of the press's progress towards independence as a development purely internal to the institutions of journalism, Schudson firmly contextualizes his press history in a description of the changes convulsing American society in the 1830s. Positioned against the historical backdrop of the Jacksonian era, the Progressives' natural chronology of the fourth estate's slow passage to freedom becomes a cultural–historical explanation.

In the 1830s, Schudson explains, the equivalent of a middle-class or "bourgeois" revolution occurred, where both the market and institutions of mass democracy expanded to include all adult, white males. This mass inclusion and accompanying institutional and cultural change were the social background for a new, specifically modern type of newspaper. The change created the (economic) resources and (cultural) demand for the modern press as the purveyor of a distinctive, novel commodity: the news.[26]

Prior to the 1830s, there circulated throughout the new republic more expensive commercial and partisan newspapers with a distribution and an editorial appeal confined to the social elite. The partisan papers consisted largely of opinions and commentary published under the directorship of politicians. These six-penny journals were insulated from the economics and culture of the market both by their circulation to an audience composed exclusively of faithful partisans, and by patronage payoffs from the parties.

The expansion of the market in the 1830s provided the press with the opportunity to free itself from all dependence upon party funding. A cheaper "penny press" with expanded circulation broke from the politicians and relied almost exclusively on the profits to be gained from selling the news to a mass audience and advertising revenues. As Schudson observes, "Sources of income that depended on social ties or political fellow-feeling were replaced by market-based income."[27]