



The Press and Watergate at 50: Understanding and Reconstructing a Seminal Story

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ABSTRACT

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Watergate, this article synthesizes the cross-disciplinary scholarly literature on the role journalism played in Nixon's fall from power. The paper describes prominent myths about Woodward and Bernstein's *Washington Post* articles, Deep Throat, and the simplified narrative that presumes the press toppled Nixon. Subsequently, we explain why Watergate remains an important story for journalism, noting how it pushed investigative journalism toward a more adversarial posture that, at its best, emphasized its role as a watchdog of the moral order. The paper also discusses Watergate's significance as a comparative framework for other instances of presidential abuse of power, how its place in historical memory is likely to change in light of transformative journalistic and political events, and directions for scholarly research on this seminal saga in American press history.

KEYWORDS

Watergate; *Washington Post*; President Nixon; news media effects; collective memory; investigative reporting

On June 18, 1972, the first article appeared somewhat obsequiously on the front page, below the fold, headlined suggestively, "Five Held in Plot to Bug Democratic Offices here." *The Washington Post* story explained that five burglars, their hands encased in surgical rubber gloves, armed with three miniature tear gas guns, a walkie-talkie and two 35 millimeter cameras, were arrested at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate complex in what reporter Alfred E. Lewis (1972) called "an elaborate plot to bug the offices of the Democratic National Committee." Lewis, a storied *Post* police reporter, phoned in the details to the newspaper's rewrite man, presaging the onslaught of stories that fellow metropolitan beat reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein would file over the coming months, uncovering a scandal and connecting the break-in to White House payoffs and political sabotage.

The infrequently-mentioned fact that Lewis, not Woodward and Bernstein, launched the Watergate saga is of a piece with the myths, legends, and myriad constructions of collective memory that characterize the complex of political events encapsulated by the Watergate catchphrase. Watergate has been the subject of hundreds of books, articles, and scholarly investigations over the past decades, a prominent focus of scholarship on news media effects (Lang and Lang 1983), collective memory (Schudson 1992), and investigative journalism (Ettema and Glasser 1998; Feldstein 2010; Marshall 2011; Protess et al.

1991). It is therefore fitting on Watergate's 50th anniversary that we examine the vast trove of Watergate scholarship, sifting through research spanning empirical studies of media impact, historical investigations of Watergate myths, as well as hermeneutic explorations of political memory, to identify the core conclusions that emerge, as well as the continuing questions that occupy journalism scholars during a time in which some of the political problems that occupied 1970s reporters remain, but parade across a milieu decidedly different in technological form and partisan content than characterized the more conventional era of the late twentieth century. Such an analysis is particularly important today, given that Watergate was often used as a reference point for adversarial journalism during the Trump presidency. Commentators on cable news panels frequently discussed how the authoritarian style evident during the Trump administration reminded them of the moral crisis in the Nixon administration and the important role played by Watergate-style journalism. In this sense, the 50-year anniversary provides a fortuitous, rather than arbitrary, occasion for a scholarly examination of Watergate exposés.

A retrospective on Watergate sheds light on several issues of importance to journalism scholars. First, a review of the multifaceted literature provides a synthesis of knowledge, telling us what we know about the effects of a core event in American journalism and how this knowledge refutes, upholds or complicates the simple narratives that have evolved over the years. Second, and importantly, building on this knowledge, this essay highlights the factors that made Watergate a watershed moment in the history of American journalism. Calling attention to issues frequently neglected in the large journalistic and academic literature on Watergate, we describe the ways Watergate inspired a journalism focused on exposing the *moral* shortcomings of individuals occupying positions of immense power rather than abuses linked with more depersonalized political institutions, as famously occurred with the Pentagon Papers. Thirdly, the paper discusses the integral role Watergate played in the construction of other political scandals and impeachments, as well as how the journalistic narrative of Watergate is changing in the face of the proliferation of media unimaginable during the Watergate era, technological changes in journalism, and tumultuous political events that occurred during the Trump administration. By reconsidering Watergate through the prisms supplied by the passage of time, we explain why Watergate still matters, underscoring its quintessential importance to journalism.

As readers of *Journalism Practice* fully appreciate, had Watergate occurred now and was told through the partisan and misinformation-filled platforms of online media, its meaning would be filtered through selective perceptions, distilled through confirmation biases. Anti-press platforms would dismiss the role played by the press, play up the occasional Woodward and Bernstein mistake, malign *The Post* as unpatriotic, and swamp the milieu with disinformation. As occurred during the two Trump impeachments, Congress would be divided, the president's minions would refuse to consider the chief executive's illegal actions, and the institutional forces the press unleashed during Watergate would be lost in a muddle of falsehoods and partisan outcries. For these and other reasons, it is important to understand the story of Watergate and the press, noting journalism's contributions to democratic values, but also the myths, complexities, and contextual issues that are of core importance in the academic study of journalism. On a broader level, by stitching together the vast journalistic and

academic literature on Watergate, and presenting perspectives informed by the transformative changes in the political media terrain, this article offers a state-of-the-journalistic-art account of a critical series of events in journalism history, punctuated by new ideas on how to advance scholarship.

Unpacking the Myths in Watergate News, 1972–1974

Myths are complex, subject to multiple meanings, and shifting interpretations as a function of perspective and time. Investigative reporting has long been shrouded in cultural myths that have bolstered beliefs in the important role that journalism plays in democratic society. Consistent with this century-long tradition, the broad scholarly literature on Watergate suggests that the most popular myth of Watergate, or “heroic narrative” as Feldstein (2014) aptly puts it, places journalism at the center of Watergate, presuming that the press, particularly Woodward and Bernstein’s exposés, “smashed the Watergate scandal wide open,” “toppled a president,” and “brought down the Nixon administration” (553–554). The myth was propelled by Bernstein and Woodward’s (1974) book, *All the President’s Men*, an “ur-text” that celebrated investigative journalism as meticulously conducted by two reporters (Brennen 2003), and was fueled even more powerfully by the 1976 film.

The movie, which featured an all-star cast that included Robert Redford, Dustin Hoffman, Hal Holbrook, and Jason Robards, garnered a Best Supporting Actor Award for Robards as editor Ben Bradlee, as well as three other nominations. The blockbuster movie portrayed journalism in heroic terms, mythologizing the line, “Follow the money,” which never appeared in the book, adding to journalism’s grandeur by telling the story from *The Post’s* prideful point of view (Greenberg 2003). The movie, more than the book, “ennobled investigative reporting and made of journalists modern heroes” (Schudson 1992, 104). It did this with its dramatization of individual reporters, accentuated by their depiction by celebrity actors, a suspenseful plot, and cinematography that deliberately contrasted darkened Washington buildings with *The Post’s* luminous sheen (see also Borins and Herst 2020).

Like any mythology, the film needed a narrative arc with the heroes and villains. How much role did the filmmaker play in mythologization? In a commemorative essay in *The New Yorker*, Orlando (2018), quoting both Woodward and Bernstein, suggested that while the two reporters were covering the story in 1972, Redford approached Woodward to create a narrative around heroic journalism and the reporters. This should not be surprising as films, unlike routine journalism, need a morality tale with a protagonist. In the cultural memory, largely because of the movie, Watergate became a story showcasing heroic journalism in the face of an authoritarian Nixon administration, in this way mythologizing the journalistic significance of Watergate investigative reporting, while minimizing the role played by a host of institutional forces (Lang and Lang 1983).

The narrative, with its mythic placement of Bernstein and Woodward at the cynosure of Watergate, was, in one sense, so journalistically narcissistic that Woodward felt obligated to reject it (Feldstein 2014), in part perhaps to strategically maintain a humble public presentation. Woodward’s caveat notwithstanding, the heroic story took center stage in American folklore, propelled by the movie, and metaphorically aided by a Biblical myth McCartney (1973) related, later famously articulated by Schudson (1992):

At its broadest, the myth of journalism in Watergate asserts that two young *Washington Post* reporters brought down the president of the United States. This is a myth of David and Goliath, of powerless individuals overturning an institution of overwhelming might. It is high noon in Washington, with two white-hatted young reporters at one end of the street and the black-hatted president at the other, protected by his minions. And the good guys win. The press, truth its only weapon, saves the day. (104)

Taking inspiration from Campbell (1949), we suggest that there are actually three components of the heroic myth: (1) an intrepid press corps uncovered Watergate, collectively exposing the burglary and corruption that followed in its wake; (2) *Post* journalists, the embodiment of moral good, applied high ethical standards to their reporting; and (3) news coverage, notably that of Woodward and Bernstein, toppled Nixon from power.

As scholars have long known, with the exception of *The Post*, most of the press did not cover, let alone uncover, Watergate in depth in 1972. During the crucial six months that followed the break-in, *The Washington Post* published about 200 articles on Watergate, many on page 1, and investigative in nature. In contrast, at least initially, other newspapers rarely gave Watergate stories this much play, infrequently conducting their own investigations (Feldstein 2004). There were many reasons for the paucity of press coverage, factors that are better understood now than in the past, in light of journalism scholarship on social production processes, and the ideological and individual determinants of news.

The burglary lay outside the mainstay of crucial news routines of the White House press corps, such as reliance on formal channels like presidential press conferences or speeches. This pushed the story off the top of reporters' professional agendas, leading them to shunt it aside in favor of more immediate stories that were sure to be published or gain favor from editors. (Fishman (1980) observed that the initial story was broken in the routine bureaucratic process of newsgathering by reporters on the local crime beat, who were less enmeshed in the network of official sources and White House-based journalistic routines that militated against enterprise investigations.)

Perhaps most importantly, the story seemed too incredible to believe, even for those schooled in presidential misdeeds. With its improbable, comically unlikely aspects, it did not cohere with reporters' schema of presidential mischief, pushing it into Hallin's (1986) sphere of deviance. As the veteran *New York Times* reporter Robert B. Semple, Jr. remarked, "It was hard to believe that a national administration, a president, would stoop to something like this. Maybe there was a belief all around that it just couldn't have happened" (Greenberg 2003, 161). For these reasons, the bulk of the press, including *The Post's* White House reporters, thought Watergate was a minor issue and didn't cover the break-in or its aftermath in copious detail, certainly not to the extent the heroic myth suggests. The news did report on Watergate during this period, particularly *The Los Angeles Times* and CBS News, enough so that it caught the ire of the Nixon Administration and began to capture attention from Washington elites. However, it was not until March, 1973 when Watergate burglar James McCord revealed that he and his associates had been pressured to remain silent and plead guilty that the press, now following a story that was a matter of public records routinely covered by political journalists, amped into high gear, jolting the story to top of the media and public agendas, where it would remain until Nixon resigned on August 8, 1974.

The second part of the fabled narrative, that Woodward and Bernstein epitomized moral good, was unpacked more quickly, certainly by the time Bernstein and Woodward's *All the President's Men* was published in 1974. Journalists raised questions about the use of anonymous sources, reporters' privacy violations, such as access to Watergate actors' phone and credit records, access that, as Bernstein himself admitted, "would outrage him if he were subjected to a similar inquiry by investigators" (Hentoff 1974, 10). Critics also raised concerns about Bernstein's failure to represent himself as a reporter in an attempt to contact lawyer Donald Segretti, as well as the duo's efforts to solicit information from Watergate grand jury members, even though jurors had taken an oath to keep their deliberations secret (Barrett 1974). While the journalists' ethical lapses certainly shaded the moral purity of their hats, their openness in grappling with moral dilemmas; insistence on a new and evolving standard at *The Post* that required reporters check with an additional source (supplementing the previously used two-source rule that enshrined the importance of journalistic verification); and utilitarian justifications of their reporting in the broader context of presidential misdeeds assuaged many, though not all, prominent ethicists (Brennen 2003; Barrett 1974).

In a related fashion, conservative critics charged that *The Post's* seemingly white-hatted reporting was tainted by a crusading anti-Nixon media bias that downplayed more serious misconduct committed by Democratic presidents, like Kennedy and Johnson, (Lasky 1977; Ambrose 1991). While this did serve as a needed corrective, placing Nixon's crimes in historical perspective, it neglected the fact that Watergate was unique, presenting "a wholly unprecedented testing of the American political and constitutional system," raising serious issues regarding the relationship of the presidency to other government institutions (Kutler 1990, xiv). Nixon's defenders' view that Nixon was an innocent victim of journalistic and liberal government forces does not pass the smell test, given the voluminous evidence that Nixon coordinated the cover-up and committed crimes (Greenberg 2003). What's more, a content analysis found that few Watergate news storied displayed bias (Lang and Lang 1983).

What Impact Did News Media Coverage of Watergate Exert?

This brings us to the dominant myth of the effects of Watergate reporting, the heroic narrative that the press toppled the president. Journalists – as an interpretive, self-interested, frequently self-aggrandizing community, particularly when it comes to the storied watchdog function – relentlessly promoted the "glorious" role the press played in ending one of the "darkest" periods in American political history, celebrating Woodward and Bernstein's distinctive contribution to investigative journalism. (Zelizer 1993, 227). Using their late twentieth century platform as preeminent informational gatekeepers, reporters mythologized Deep Throat, the sobriquet for the unnamed source who offered up supposedly-crucial information, his image burnished by Hal Holbrook's memorable filmic performance as a shadowy figure who surreptitiously met with Woodward in a dark parking garage, motivated, the movie suggested, by patriotism and altruism. The endless speculation in books and articles about the identity of Deep Throat, coupled with the reporters' determination to protect their source at all costs, boosted the narrative that dutiful dedication to journalistic principle underpinned the Watergate saga.

Of course, truth was murkier, in light of the minor role Deep Throat actually played in *The Post's* coverage, as well as the inaccuracy of much of his information (Feldstein 2014). And when it turned out that Mark Felt's motives for revealing information were based less on altruism than resentment at having been passed over for FBI director, some of the mythic purity of the original narrative – a source acting from honorable motives, a reporter gratefully relaying information that protected the body politic – was tarnished. Determined to preserve the beatific narrative, journalists, particularly Bernstein and Woodward, rushed to Felt's defense, praising his courage and the wisdom of his decision to reveal information that served the national interest (Carlson 2010; Carlson and Berkowitz 2014).

This brings us to central question in the Watergate saga: Did news actually exert these effects, and were the influences as normatively positive as the narrative asserts? If *The Post's* stories exerted an impact on public opinion, one would expect that this would show up in the issues voters regarded as most important. But neither Watergate nor honesty in government were perceived as among the most important issues facing the country during the 1972 election (McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes 1974).

There were several reasons why Watergate did not register as a salient issue in 1972. First, news stories accepted the Nixon administration's belittling "third-rate burglary" frame. It was initially a relatively remote, high-threshold issue that, for these reasons, required more intense coverage to break through people's political belief systems. Yet, even as news outlets downplayed the story, they did not ignore it. From the summer months through the remainder of the campaign, network TV devoted considerable coverage to Watergate, and at least one network covered it on an average evening (Lang and Lang 1983).

As events occurred at a lightning-fast pace – the McCord revelations, resignations of Nixon aides John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman, John Dean's testimony, and appointment of a Special Prosecutor – the issue occupied a prominent place on the media agenda. Newspapers devoted increasingly more space to Watergate, and television coverage approached saturation levels (Weaver, McCombs, and Spellman 1975). No longer framing Watergate as an outlandish caper, reporters invoked the language of scandal, "dirty tricks," illicit surveillance by people affiliated with the White House and, increasingly over time, "the public's right to know." By offering up a context in which the events could be processed, framing issues through particular metaphors, connecting the news to familiar political symbols, and linking the public with political elites through opinion polls, news built an agenda. Journalists constructed a tableau on which the issue could be considered by the public and elites, transforming its meaning, and altering the playing field on which events would be evaluated by political actors (Lang and Lang 1983). Woodward and Bernstein's reporting, while hardly hypodermic in its impact, exerted importance influences (Marshall 2011). Their stories laid the out the *mise en scène* on which the subsequent drama would play out – necessary but not sufficient conditions that introduced the characters, created the plotlines, and constructed an architecture of morality and blame that the public could apply to the problem thrust upon them. But the heavy lifting of props and critical dramatic actions that occurred were performed by the leading actors – institutions like the FBI and key members of Congress, in short the political insiders who developed critical connections between news and their constitutional imperatives. On a still broader level, the Senate hearings, chaired by Senator Sam Ervin,

lent a sociological legitimacy to the process, encouraging legislators to be responsive to societal norms and consider the larger constitutional issues involved in the crisis.

The press did not topple or unseat Nixon. Instead news media influence, though necessary, was indirect, crucially mediated by political leaders and institutions – partisan Democrats, as well as a critical group of Republican legislators, who responded to a particular concatenation of events, historically distinctive as events always are, and far from preordained to lead to the resignation of a president. Yet the particularity of Watergate is either overlooked or invoked in the endless debate about whether the system worked or could have easily failed, had certain events not occurred. Had John Dean not testified, Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox displayed less rectitude, Judge John Sirica failed to order Nixon to turn over the White House tapes, or (in an implication relevant for the very different impeachment context of former President Trump), had the press not covered the issue in a nonpartisan manner, Nixon might not have been forced to resign, and the Watergate narrative that extolled the press, journalism, and the American constitutional system would have lost its sheen.

While there is no definitive answer to the question of whether “the system worked,” there is consensus among scholars that the press – particularly Woodward and Bernstein – mattered. Lang and Lang’s book, while immensely valuable, can, with its focus on political institutions, understate the ways that *The Post* kept the Watergate story alive, ultimately helping to build an agenda and psychologically prime leading political actors, in this way setting the stage for broadening the moral and constitutional frames of a “third-rate political burglary” that impelled legislators to act. “It is doubtful that others would have brought Nixon down without Woodward and Bernstein’s work,” Marshall (2011, 106) observed.

Why Watergate Matters

This brings us to a core purpose of the present paper, highlighting just what makes Watergate a watershed moment in the colorful history of American journalism. To be sure, Watergate’s impact would not have been as consequential in the absence of the groundwork that was laid by the increasing skepticism about government sources and Vietnam-era reporting, such as the Pentagon Papers. But Watergate played an important role in moving investigative reporting beyond its traditional reliance on the routines of watchdog journalism to a focus on the moral failings of political leaders who wield great power, an adversary journalism with a distinctly moral character (Ettema and Glasser 1998). While one can date some of this moral fervor to the early twentieth century muckrakers and locate traces in Seymour Hersh’s 1969 reporting of My Lai massacre, which spotlighted the moral deficiencies in U.S. officers who ordered the murder of South Vietnamese civilians at My Lai, Watergate was pioneering and distinctive. The *Post* reporters were relentless in their examination of the characterological defects in a president, constitutionally accountable to voters, for violation of principles sacred to democratic government (Bernstein and Woodward 2012).

Leading scholars of investigative journalism (e.g., Ettema and Glasser 1998; Protesse et al. 1991), cognizant of the paths blazed by Watergate reporting, referred to investigative journalists as “custodians of conscience” or to a “journalism of outrage” that emphasized the importance of exposing “villainous conduct—typically by authorities—” that

would provide a moral impetus to social reform (Protess et al. 1991, 53). Investigative reporters after Watergate subjected their story frames to a “moral indignation test’ ... to evoke outrage at the violation of clearly held values in the conduct of public affairs” (Ettema and Glasser 1998, 12). The defining tenet of this cultural shift was the creation of new rules for investigative reporting that worked outside the confines of routine journalism, which operated within the dominant objectivity paradigm (Kumar 2013). The journalistic arc that oscillated between the traditional objectivity norm and adversarial journalism now bent toward adversarialism.

The cultural shift produced by Watergate had tangible effects on journalism, as we will discuss. But it is important to dispel a mythical idea that still circulates, that the heroic investigations spurred a vast growth in journalism majors. An analysis of journalism enrollments in the 1970s shows the only large enrollment occurred between 1970 and 1971, a couple of years before Watergate occurred. The enrollment increases that did occur during this time were a spillover effect of large numbers of women going to college looking for professional majors in communication and writing (Becker and Graf 1995)

What Watergate actually did was to bolster investigative reporting at newspapers across the country (Marshall 2011). It spurred the creation of an organization, Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc., that innovatively pulled together reporters from competing news outlets, working together on crusading investigative journalism (Marron 1997). This included “The Arizona Project” that exposed the shady activities of Arizona Mafia, businessmen, and political leaders, giving IRE a national reputation in journalistic circles and spawning “a new era of unbounded muckraking” (Downie 1976, 10).

The investigatory zeal inevitably led to excesses, as reporters hoping for muckraking glory saw a Watergate under every political rock, pursuing stories with undue cynicism about public officials (Schudson 1992), hungering for salacious stories. The grandeur of Watergate exposés discouraged reporters from pursuing important, but less monumental, stories, like mismanagement and corruption on a smaller political scale that actually had more tangible effects on citizens’ lives, as when officials’ stealing from public coffers reduced a city’s tax base. The lack of press investigations of these issues – and resultant absence of government follow-through – could have calcified corruption at local levels (Hamilton 2016).

While some of the Watergate-inspired investigations focused on legitimate social problems, others had a “Gotcha” aspect that ignored deeper systemic causes of the issue, or, as in the case of exposés of the Gary Hart, drew attention to trivial entertainment-style issues at the expense of more politically significant questions of public policy (Bai 2014). The moral zeal that served journalism well during Watergate, when taken to excess in the exposé about Senator Gary Hart’s sexual activity, seemed trivial, prurient, shorn of the democratic idealism that inspired the Watergate investigations.

And yet it would be a mistake to presume, as a literal interpretation of the heroic Watergate narrative suggests, that the investigatory ethos led reporters from 1972 onward to challenge presidential authority or rebut White House narratives. Notably, the Reagan White House, mastering news management strategies and adroitly controlling the politics of spin, exerted considerable control over Reagan’s political communication appearances, reining in negative press, in this way, as Hertsgaard (1988) famously wrote, keeping reporters “on bended knee.” While, of course, Reagan did receive negative press, particularly during his second term, journalistic subservience to the Reagan White

House, including during Iran-Contra, points to limits in the duration of the surge in investigatory zeal that followed Watergate (Schudson 2011). Investigative reporting varies as a complex function of economic, political and technological forces; it is, a gold standard of journalism that can produce social change depending on a variety of exogenous variables, including the level of political activity of readers, the extent to which decision-makers act on the information, and the nature of the benefits and costs of change (Marshall 2011; Hamilton 2016). Watergate was one inflection point in the long distribution of investigative journalism, but not the only one.

But one can go too far in diminishing Watergate's impact. On a macro level, the electorate's disillusionment with Nixon's (and by extension Republicans') political morality was an important (though not the only) factor in the sweeping Democratic congressional victories in 1974, when Democrats captured 49 seats previously held by Republicans (Uslaner and Conway 1985, 1986; Kutler 1990). The self-declared "Watergate babies," House representatives determined to limit abuses of presidential power, passed significant political reforms, including the Hughes Ryan Amendment that required the president inform Congress about secretive CIA activities, and the War Powers Resolution, which sought to limit the chief executive's power to commit troops to military action without the consent of Congress.

The most significant Congressional legislative achievements that emerged were the Ethics in Government Act of 1978 and campaign finance laws. The Ethics in Government Act allowed for the appointment of a Special Prosecutor to investigate illegal actions by officials in the Executive Branch, created an Office of Government Ethics, and required members of Congress to disclose their income and financial investments. All of these proved controversial, in some cases were repealed, and were challenged in the courts. But they all emerged from Watergate, raising the question, alas, of just what were the takeaways, or lessons learned from the civic and cultural traumas of the Watergate years. As is always the case in understanding political mythic narratives, the question begets other questions. Was the lesson the liberal view, that the U.S. was "a government of laws and not of men," a conservative perspective, that legal reform relies on a Burkean reliance on "good men," or some complicated middle ground, that the nation must be "a government of laws *and* men" (Schudson 1992, 100–101)? The questions and answers attest to the underlying role that rhetorical constructions play in the evolution of a political saga.

Watergate, Journalism and Collective Memory

Scholars of collective memory explore how societies recall or construct events, locating memory broadly in institutions and cultural artifacts. Of course, individuals literally remember, but, as Coser (1992), drawing on the Durkheimian tradition, noted, "these individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past" (22). Journalism, as a preeminent institution whose narratives reach millions of citizens, can exert an outsize impact on what and how people remember, serving as a central, complex, and ever-changing "repository of collective memory in every society in which it finds itself" (Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014, 2). By bridging work in journalism studies and the sociology of public memory, scholars have sought to provide new insights about both domains, enriching knowledge of what people

remember, the processes by which this occurs, and what it is about journalism – its institutional status, construction of symbolic content, and location at the time and place where events happen – that offers unique contributions to collective memory.

While there is some foundational facticity to the past, it is always in flux, in a process of reconstruction by different actors and institutions, not the least of which is journalism. In considering these issues, it is useful to appreciate the distinctive aspects of Watergate. First, there is its famous suffix, which led to a multitude of applications to dozens of other contexts from Billygate to Monicagate to Deflategate, in which the suffix, “gate,” was breathlessly applied. Watergate is not popularly associated with a particular date, in the way that September 11, November 22, or May 4 (the date four students were killed at Kent State in 1970) are. Indeed, it is one of the few events to have become part of the archive of national memory which is not named after a date, a singular event (V-J day) or an individual (Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday), but ... a residential and office complex! This gives it a frivolous quality that may have stimulated the ritualistic, and frequently silly, appending “gate” to events conceptually different from Watergate. In fact, Watergate was a high-threshold issue, experienced abstractly rather than materially or personally. It is inextricably linked with Nixon and political morality, and this has been the focus of many portrayals in popular culture, from Mallon’s (2012) eponymous novel to the movie “Forrest Gump” to Lynyrd Skynyrd’s hit song, “Sweet Home Alabama.” Beyond entertainment, Watergate has exerted significant effects on journalistic practice, giving rise to a three-source verification rule, noted earlier, which is taught in journalism schools, discussed in journalism textbooks, employed by professional journalists, and featured in Harcup’s (2014) authoritative *A Dictionary of Journalism*. In addition, as suggested earlier, Watergate exerted a propulsive impact on investigative journalism, helping usher in a journalism of moral and political outrage (with salutary and occasionally pernicious effects), as well as a “renewal, reinvigoration, and remythologization of muckraking” (Schudson 1992, 125).

This makes sense because Watergate is the most famous scandal in the archives of American collective memory in which political journalism played a central mythical role. Accordingly, a particularly fitting context with which to appreciate Watergate’s changing constructions is the role it has played in journalistic and political narratives about scandals involving the possibility of presidential impeachment (Reagan during Iran-Contra in 1986) or actual impeachment (Clinton in 1998, and Trump in 2019 and 2021). By using Watergate as a prism with which to view these subsequent presidential crises, we gain insight into the impact that Watergate exerted on American politics, as well as the practice of journalism in society.

Watergate was a constant refrain, anchor, and focus of comparison during Iran-Contra, despite the many differences between the two, including the fact that Iran-Contra centered on foreign policy, rather than domestic political illegalities; in Iran-Contra, the original illegal acts were arguably more serious than the cover-up, in contrast to Watergate; and investigative journalism played a much less significant role, given that it did not uncover the illicit activities through enterprise reporting (Marshall 2011). The symbolic tableau was different too. The larger-than-life cast of characters in the televised Senate hearings, personified by Senators Sam Ervin and Howard Baker, gave Congress a gravitas that it lacked during Iran-Contra, dominated as it was by a polarizing, if charismatic, figure, Colonel Oliver North, who looked like he was straight out of Central Casting.

What's more, the linguistic legacies of Watergate – the emphasis on definitive proof, in the form of a “smoking gun” and verifiable presidential knowledge, with Senator Howard Baker’s “what did the president know and when did he know it?” quip – served as cultural and legal points of reference, even if these were not necessarily the appropriate political yardsticks for Iran-Contra. This allowed the White House to evade responsibility and circumvent impeachment by framing the issue in terms of Reagan’s seemingly innocent lack of knowledge, and the narrowly-constructed argument that the lack of evidence Reagan knew about the funding diversion was sufficient to clear him of broader constitutional wrongdoing. Critics argued that even if there was no hard proof that Reagan knew about the diversion he was implicitly or explicitly guilty of implementing a policy that contravened official policies and laws, laying the foundation for “foreign policy by secret junta” (Schudson 1992, 181). Alas, aided by his mastery of the visual image, news management skills, and ability to construct pictorial images that overwhelmed political facticity (Adatto 2008), Reagan was more able than Nixon to evade harsh public blame for his role in a serious presidential scandal.

While Watergate represented a threat to the ethical propriety of the electoral process and Iran-Contra imperiled the constitutional balance between the executive and legislative branches, the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal posed a threat to judicial processes and the president’s obligation to defer to the law (Pfiffner 2007). Once again, Watergate was a constant point of reference in the construction of this, another political scandal, both linguistically via the somewhat awkward Monicagate phrase, and the comparison between the illicit and immoral actions both presidents committed. While public opinion exerted an indirect effect on Watergate, with the public acting largely as a bystander (Lang and Lang 1983), it played a much more important role in the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, with Americans evincing consistent poll-based support for Clinton, suggesting there was a democratic basis for keeping Clinton in office. The press’s role was different too – investigatory during Watergate, with stories uncovered by mainstream news outlets; titillating during the Clinton scandal, with news reports increasingly derived from newer digital platforms, like The Drudge Report.

Importantly, Watergate focused on impeachable actions that tied Nixon to burglary, a felony in the criminal code, and occurred in the putatively public domain. However, the Clinton scandal focused on the disjuncture between arguably private behaviors and public fidelity to the law. Liberals emphasized this distinction, while conservatives, perhaps operating from a different set of moral standards (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009), focused on the impropriety of the president’s actions, the degree to which his private behavior offended standards of public conduct, and the importance of holding the president accountable for lying under oath. As with Watergate, different ideological narratives played out in the journalistic discourse, with liberals arguing that Clinton’s misconduct was less morally consequential than Nixon’s, and conservatives pointing to the shameful of Clinton’s behavior, sexual actions that Nixon had not performed. For much of the public, Watergate loomed large, as it involved the president’s violation of the public trust, while the Clinton scandal constituted a private infidelity that, at least in view of most of the public, did not constitute an act of political misconduct (Kennedy 2021).

Watergate also cast a long shadow on public discourse about the two Trump impeachments. Until 2019 and 2021, Watergate could be viewed as exemplifying how the system,

thanks to the press and heroic members of Congress, weathered an attempt at presidential abuse. But the Watergate narrative was revised in the wake of the Trump presidency.

In a striking example of playwright Tom Stoppard's view that history is "irony on the move" (Lahr 2002), Nixon's long-excoriated sins were now viewed in a comparatively positive light, as conservative commentators, including Garment (2019), the wife of Nixon aide Leonard Garment, judged Trump to be more shameful than Nixon. Liberals, from a former Watergate prosecutor to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, viewed Trump's actions as more serious than Nixon's. As news articles reported again and again, there were important differences between the two scandals, including the focus on an abstruse foreign affair issue in Trump's case rather than a distant, but easier-to-comprehend, electoral misconduct crime in Nixon's; narrower scope of the Ukraine investigation; more intense polarization of the public and Congress in 2019 (Brownstein 2019); absence of bipartisan agreement or defection of Republicans in Trump's case; and impact of partisan media outlets, including conservative platforms that offered a distorted version of the facts (Jurkowitz and Mitchell 2020), ensuring that the media could not confer the blanket of legitimacy that the press and the televised Senate hearings did in 1973 and 1974.

The increasing gulf between the classic, heroic Watergate narrative and the present came into sharper relief with Trump's second impeachment. "The System Worked" myth that is part of the classic Watergate narrative seemed a relic of days gone by. Despite many journalistic accounts attesting to the fairness of the election, as well as numerous rejections of Trump's false fraud claims by the courts, insurgents stormed the Capitol on January 6, and 147 Republican members of Congress voted to overturn the 2020 election results, violent and stark indications the system nearly failed in the rudimentary task of certifying the will of the voters. This makes Watergate either a touching "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington"-style reminder of how things once worked out, or an increasingly irrelevant narrative for a more fractious, populist age, in which the imperfect, but democratically necessary, institutional press (Reese 2021) is less able to keep false, obviously partisan information from seeping into news reports.

Future Implications

The journalism scholarship on Watergate was written during an era in which the press was the dominant narrator of political culture and its interpretive authority carried heft with the public and elites. A constant refrain in the Watergate scholarly literature has been the prevailing impact of conventional news as a premier gatekeeper and community that stamped its interpretation of Watergate on elites and the public. However, in the new hybrid eco-system, power in the journalistic field has been distributed to a multitude of new assemblages, cross-national infrastructures, and ideological platforms (Chadwick 2013; Kumar 2013).

The power of conventional journalistic narration, while still important on high-threshold national issues, has been dispersed and diluted. The array of Watergate narratives that dominated during the late twentieth century are likely to be amplified by others that vary in their fealty to the facts and that view Nixon through the prism of Trump. Liberal narratives could ironically find opportunities to praise Nixon, not to bury him, in light of his willingness to resign rather than fight a divisive battle, while conservative myths could argue, as some have already, that Nixon erred by failing to cover his

tracks or that his sins were far less serious than those of Hillary Clinton, with her private email server, or Barack Obama, in light of the (fallacious) claim that he wiretapped Trump Tower (Bennett 2020). Increasingly, Watergate may be viewed through the norm-shattering prism of Donald J. Trump. Journalists took particular umbrage at Trump, because he defiled the value they place on truth, with its foundation in the storied, if fraught, concept of objectivity; he attacked the press as an institution pivotal to democracy; and his no-wholes-barred insults wounded their overweening pride (CNN 2018). Psychologically speaking, Trump was literally and metaphorically the figure that occupied the postmodern political ground. For these reasons, Trump, rather than Nixon (especially given the temporal gulf between Watergate and the year most reporters were born), may be the prism through which journalists view presidential abuse and Nixon's crimes.

What's more, it is likely that, to the extent Watergate lives on as a political memory, it will be processed differently by the many different cultural communities that are alive, well, and online. In a society stripped of traditional media gatekeepers, in which people selectively expose themselves to congenial political information, received through their own communal online networks, beliefs about Watergate will be increasingly experienced through subjective ideological lenses, separately, not collectively, in culturally isolated "memory silos" (Edy 2014). Unfortunately, in those partisan networks which distrust or detest the press, Watergate will come to lose its time-honored sheen, becoming a focal point for distortions and factual inaccuracies that reinforce an anti-democratic narrative filled with hostile media biases.

All this suggests the impermanence and changing constructions of Watergate in light of new events, cultural transformations, and altered frameworks on the past. Yet it is important that Watergate be remembered and studied as an example of how journalism served (if not saved) democracy and created an adversarial model whereby reporters increasingly held leaders responsible for patent violations of political morality.

What are the implications for journalism scholarship? Journalism scholars should examine what people and the press remember about Watergate, as well as how they construct the past, even as Watergate fades into the distance. Watergate functioned as "the unavoidable central myth of American journalism" (Schudson 1992, 126), and as such offers a vantage point from which to appreciate changing media and public reconstructions of politics and news. Three main directions for research present themselves.

First, given that journalism and memory studies focus on who, why, and how one remembers (Zelizer 1995, 2008), it is useful to content analyze how the legacy media has changed its interpretation of Watergate from the 1970s through Iran-Contra, the Clinton impeachment and Trump's norm-shattering years. It would also be helpful to examine how the many hybrid and ideological sites discuss Watergate on its 50th anniversary and during other scandals emerging from the abuse of political power, as these outlets are claiming the interpretive authority formerly associated with conventional news.

Second, research should examine what the public still remembers or believes about Watergate, as well as distortions in knowledge as a function of age, partisanship and preferred news platform. Given increased national partisanship in the U.S. and the influence of hybrid, ideological news sites, it is likely there may no longer be a collective memory of Watergate as a series of events in which journalism played a pivotal role in preserving democratic government.

Third, studies could examine the continued mythologizing of investigative journalism through myth-making entertainment media. For example, we witnessed a familiar dramatization of journalism in the movie, “Spotlight,” based on *Boston Globe* investigations of the shielding of priests accused of sexual assault and exploitation of young boys by the Catholic Church. When the movie “Spotlight” was released, *The Globe* released a short documentary of the Spotlight special projects team to correct any attempt to mythologize the actual reporters who worked on the investigation (see Boston Globe Spotlight Team 2016). Research could explore the interplay of fact and myth in other fictionalized and documentary accounts, such as those on Edward Snowden, in this way building the literature on hyperreality, expanding knowledge of how truth, fact, and fiction have blurred in an era shorn of conventional media gatekeepers,

As a classic node at the intersection between journalism and memory, one that is consensually viewed as a significant moment in the history of investigative journalism, scholarship on Watergate can aid in discovering the processes by which collective memory changes. On a normative level, this scholarship might offer suggestions on how to help citizens appreciate the key roles that journalism played during a storied national crisis, as well as how a confluence of journalistic, political and public forces coalesced to exert a salutary outcome on the polity, heralding an investigative journalism of moral outrage that continues to evolve – and hopefully survive – some 50 years after Alfred Lewis’s 1972 story on a burglary at the Watergate Office Building.

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