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Poll Finds Support for Press as an Adversary to Government

By MARTIN ARNOLD

A confidential Gallup poll indicates that the public supports the press's adversary role in dealing with the Government and that a majority believe that the Government tries to keep too many secrets.

The poll, taken for newspapers that subscribe to the regular Gallup Poll, also reports that 62 per cent of those questioned agreed that news reporters should be protected from being forced to disclose confidential sources—an increase of 5 percentage points over a similar Gallup poll in December, 1972, before the bulk of the Watergate disclosures. The latest poll was taken in October, 1973.

On the other hand, according to the new poll, 40 per cent of those questioned agreed with the criticism that "newspapers often make innocent persons look guilty before they are tried in court," and 37 per cent more partly agreed. Nine per cent definitely disagreed, 13 per cent partly disagreed and 1 per cent gave no answer.

Too Much 'Wrong?'

According to the poll, much of the public also agreed that newspapers devoted too much space to what was wrong with America and not enough to what was right. Thirty-nine per cent of all respondents accepted that proposition, and 37 per cent partly agreed. Eight per cent definitely disagreed, 14 per cent partly disagreed and 2 per cent gave no answer.

The figures changed slightly by educational background. That is, 40 per cent of those with some college agreed, 43 per cent with a high school background agreed and 30 per cent with only a grade school background agreed.

And the public, for the most part, believed that newspapers "are not careful about getting their facts straight." For instance, 26 per cent of all polled definitely agreed that newspapers were not careful enough and 41 per cent partly agreed, while only 9 per cent definitely disagreed with the proposition and 21 per cent partly disagreed. Three per cent gave no answer. The figures changed only slightly when broken down by educational background.

Assessment Difficult

The total poll results make it difficult, according to observers, to assess the impact that the Nixon Administration's attacks on the press have had on the public. For instance, the Administration is opposed to laws protecting newsmen from being forced to disclose confidential sources, yet the public supports such laws.

On the other hand, the Administration does advance the thesis that newspapers are not careful about getting their facts correct, and the public tends to agree. The question was:

"Will you tell me whether you definitely agree, partly agree, partly disagree, or definitely disagree with this criticism (of newspapers in general)? 'Newspapers are not careful about getting their facts straight.'"

The responses were:

	Definitely Agree	Partly Agree	Partly Disagree	Definitely Disagree	No Answer
All respondents	26%	41%	21%	9%	3%
College background	22	42	23	11	2
High school	29	42	20	8	1
Grade school	24	36	24	9	7

To further confuse the issue, the public is nearly exactly split over whether newspapers do a good job in presenting both sides of controversial issues, and whether newspapers tend to stress news that favors the liberal side.

Spokesmen for the Administration generally contend that newspapers do not do a good job presenting both sides of issues and that they tend to favor the liberal side. The Gallup question was:

"In general, how would you rate the job done by the newspapers you read in presenting both sides of controversial issues—excellent, good, only fair, or poor?"

The responses:

	Excellent	Good	Only Fair	Poor	No answer
All respondents	8%	41%	39%	9%	3%
College background	6	43	38	13	0
High school	8	41	39	10	2
Grade school	11	38	40	3	8
Republicans	6	38	44	9	2
Democrats	9	47	35	6	3
Independents	9	36	40	13	2

The Gallup organization also asked:

"Here are some criticisms that have been made about newspapers in general. Will you tell me whether you definitely agree, partly agree, partly disagree, or definitely disagree? Newspapers stress the news that favors the liberal side."

The responses:

	All Respondents
Definitely agree	12%
Partly agree	34%
Partly disagree	33%
Definitely disagree	12%
No answer	8%

"Newspapers stress the news that favors the conservative side."

The responses:

	All Respondents
Definitely agree	5%
Partly agree	29%
Partly disagree	41%
Definitely disagree	15%
No answer	10%

The adversary role of the press in dealing with the Government was reflected in the public's approval of shield laws to allow newsmen to protect their sources and in the public's belief, according to the poll, that the Government keeps too many secrets.

The latter proposition was phrased this way: the Government says it has a duty to keep certain things confidential, and the press says the Government classifies too many things as confidential. Those polled were asked who they agreed with the most, and 53 per cent said they agreed with the press, 33 per cent with the Government, and 14 per cent had no opinion.

Economically, the poll showed that the outlook for newspapers was not bad at all. For instance, 79 per cent of the people polled said they purchased a newspaper or newspapers regularly. And 88 per cent said that they would continue to get a newspaper if the price went to 15 cents, while 12 per cent said they would not or could not now say.

Further, 70 per cent said they would continue to get a daily newspaper if the price went to 20 cents per copy, while 30 per cent said they would not, or could not now say.

More of the adults questioned said they would be reached by newspapers on a typical day then said they would be reached by television or radio. But the gap between newspapers and radio is narrowing.

For instance, the percentage of all adults reached by the three news media on what the poll called a typical day was, in 1973, 70 per cent by daily newspapers, 62 per cent by television newscasts and 59 per cent by radio newscasts. In 1970, the Gallup figures were 73 per cent newspapers, 60 per cent television and 65 per cent radio.

The poll also asked:

"Do you think that freedom of the press is endangered in this country or not?"

The responses:

	Yes	No	Don't Know
All respondents	32%	55%	13%
College background	39	58	3
Grade school	25	45	30
Under 30	42	50	8
30-49	29	50	11
50 & over	28	53	19
East	30	59	11
Midwest	32	57	11
South	27	50	23
West	43	51	6
Republicans	23	65	12
Democrats	31	52	17
Independents	43	50	7