

# The President's Questioners: Consequential Attributes of the White House Press Corps

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## Abstract

Are members of the White House press corps unified in their treatment of the president at any given time, or does their behavior differ by demographic and professional attributes? This study addresses this issue through multidimensional measurement of the aggressiveness of questions put to nine presidents (1953–2000) in news conferences. In addition to the familiar print/broadcast distinction, three largely unexamined attributes are explored: (1) organizational status (journalists affiliated with prominent vs. marginal news outlets), (2) interpersonal familiarity (frequent vs. infrequent news conference participants), and (3) gender (male vs. female journalists). The results indicate that print/broadcast and organizational status, which received the most attention in previous research, are the least consequential here. By contrast, previously unexamined attributes of familiarity and gender were more consequential. Frequent participants were in some respects more aggressive than infrequent participants. Female journalists were in some respects more aggressive than their male counterparts in the earlier part of the study period, but these differences attenuated over time. Explanations for these differences, which may include processes that govern entry into the press corps and/or subsequent on-the-job factors, are also discussed.

## Keywords

news conferences, presidency, White House press corps, journalistic norms

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How unified are U.S. journalists in their professional practices? This remains an open question, in part because American news media research has tended to focus on widespread conventions of reportage that transcend individual journalists and news organizations. This holistic tendency has a long heritage, and it has been reinforced by a variety of contemporary trends—the recent influx of ideas from neoinstitutionalism (Cook 1998; Sparrow 1999) and Bourdieu (Benson and Neveu 2005) treating journalism as a cohesive institutional field, political/psychological theorizing about the common interests and attitudes purportedly shared by “*the media elite*” (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Lichter et al. 1986), and the belief that the recent concentration of media ownership has led to the homogenization of news content (Bagdikian 2004; Klinenberg 2007). While survey studies decompose journalists by medium, occupational prestige, gender, and other factors (Weaver et al. 2006), only the print/broadcast distinction has received sustained attention in empirical research on actual journalistic practices (i.e., Gans 1979; Kaniss 1991; Robinson and Sheehan 1983; Weaver 1975). Consequently, the predominant view is that various social structural and cultural factors converge to yield a more or less standardized if not homogeneous news product, and this view is supported by an empirical focus on general patterns and central tendencies of news coverage.

This approach has been productive, but it also has intrinsic limitations that impede theoretical progress. For instance, studies of partisanship in the news have been hampered by focusing on general content patterns rather than variations in content that might be associated with ideologically differentiated reporters or news organizations. Much of what appears to be “liberal” or “conservative” bias in the aggregate can be accounted for by nonpolitical factors (Clancey and Robinson 1985; Niven 2001; Schiffer 2006), and recent work pursuing a more differentiated analysis (Groseclose and Milyo 2005) finds only a loose and at times inconsistent relationship between the editorial slant of news organizations and the news stories they generate. The lesson from partisan bias research is clear. Theories of news cannot advance until empirical work differentiates among journalists and news outlets so that hypothetically consequential factors (bureaucratic forms, commercial pressures, professional values, ownership structures, political biases, etc.) can be subjected to empirical tests (cf. Hallin and Mancini 2004).

Work of this sort has begun to emerge in recent years, with comparative studies focusing on the impact of market competition on news quality (Entman 1989), mainstream versus specialized news outlets aimed at racial and ethnic minorities (Hunt 1999; Jacobs 2000), and embedded versus independent reporters covering the Iraq war (Aday et al. 2005; Haigh et al. 2006).

The present study contributes to this more differentiating perspective by examining journalistic behavior in presidential news conferences across five decades. The empirical focus is on the vigorousness or aggressiveness of the questions asked of the president, using a multidimensional system for analyzing aggressiveness in question design. This study proceeds from the assumption that news conference questioning provides a window into the culture of the Washington press corps, albeit one that is

empirically distinct from subsequent print and broadcast news stories about news conferences. Patterns of questioning are not necessarily representative of story-based patterns of news coverage, although historical trends in both domains have tended to run in parallel (Clayman et al. 2006), suggesting that these forms of press behavior are to some extent associated with one another. But representativeness aside, news conference questioning is itself a prominent mode of press behavior and hence worthy of study as a phenomenon in its own right. The news conference is a locus of direct encounters between the president and elite members of the press corps that is routinely broadcast live. Moreover, journalists' questions can influence the president's responses as well as subsequent news coverage, and may themselves be incorporated into quotations and sound bites (Clayman 1990).

Prior research on the same database has identified general historical trends in aggressive questioning (Clayman et al. 2006), and systematic variations in relation to key aspects of the economic and sociopolitical context (Clayman et al. 2007, 2010). In this article, the focus shifts to variations across journalists based on their demographic and professional attributes. Although the familiar print/broadcast distinction is addressed here, the primary emphasis is on three largely unexplored dimensions of variation.

### **Organizational Status: Prominent versus Marginal News Outlets**

The distinction between prominent and prestigious news organizations (e.g., the *New York Times*, network TV news, the major wire services) versus more marginal organizations (e.g., local newspapers and TV broadcasts, regional news services) has been a recurrent theme in interview- and survey-based research on journalists (e.g., Hess 1981; Weaver et al. 2006) as well as research on officials' news management efforts (Cook 1990; Kernell 1986). But with some notable exceptions (Molotch and Lester 1975; Palmgren and Clarke 1977), few studies have systematically compared actual news output along this potentially important axis of variation. The conventional wisdom among media and public relations practitioners (Kernell 1986: 74), and to some extent the broader media studies literature, suggests that *prestigious news outlets are more vigorous and less deferential than marginal news outlets*. Numerous mechanisms might underlie this hypothesized association. Local journalists may be directly inhibited by their diminished prestige or by their provincial audiences. Since they tend to have less academic training (Hess 1981: 45–46), they may have less fully internalized the watchdog role and the professional value of independence. It is also possible that their more vigorous colleagues tend to advance up the ranks to more prestigious news organizations since the journalism profession values and presumably rewards aggressive conduct (especially since the late 1960s; see Clayman et al. 2006, 2010; Hallin 1992; Patterson 1993). All of these processes suggest the hypothesis that journalists working for less prestigious, predominantly local news organizations are less vigorous than their more prominent colleagues.

## Interpersonal Familiarity: Frequent versus Infrequent Participants

A second dimension of variation concerns the frequency with which journalists participate in presidential news conferences. The distinction between regular and occasional participation is of interest because of its ramifications for the quality of social relations with the president. Regulars have presumably developed at least some acquaintanceship or interpersonal familiarity with the president, whereas occasional participants remain relatively impersonal and largely anonymous occupants of the journalistic role.

How might this bear on the aggressiveness of questioning? Alternative hypotheses are suggested by different bodies of scholarly research. One possibility is that *frequent participants tend to be less aggressive than infrequent participants*. This is based on the insight that proximity and familiarity can breed empathy and a reluctance to disturb a stable and rewarding relationship. Thus, in a documentary review of reportage leading up to the Iraq War, Bill Moyers (2007) has argued that the most skeptical journalistic voices came from outside the beltway. Correspondingly, some studies suggest that once the war got underway, embedded reporters were more sympathetic to the military than nonembedded reporters (Haigh et al. 2006). If a similar dynamic is at work here, perhaps frequent news conference participants are generally reluctant to “rock the boat,” whereas infrequent participants are more disengaged and freer to enact their professional role vigorously.

The alternative hypothesis—that *frequent participants tend to be more aggressive than infrequent participants*—is suggested by sociolinguistic research on language practices beyond the domain of journalism per se (Brown and Levinson 1987). Interpersonal familiarity has been associated with fewer face-saving politeness rituals and more blunt and straightforward modes of conduct. This association is explicable on the grounds that we observe the niceties of interaction most carefully when dealing with those with whom we are unacquainted. If this general tendency holds in the news conference environment, it should translate into more aggressive questioning by familiar regulars, whereas occasional participants should remain more cautious and deferential to the president. This association may be reinforced by professional gate-keeping processes, insofar as the journalism profession (as noted earlier) rewards aggressive conduct, and insofar as participation in high-profile presidential news conferences is regarded as a badge of professional achievement.

## Gender: Males versus Females

Research on gender in journalism is relatively limited. While *topics* of news coverage have been shown to vary by reporter gender (e.g., Chambers et al. 2004; c.f., Craft and Wanta 2004; Robinson 2005), there are as yet no systematic comparisons of male/female journalists in terms of the *tenor* of news that they produce. Alternative hypotheses may nonetheless be derived from broader scholarship on gender, minorities, and

work. One possibility is that journalistic practices are straightforwardly aligned with traditional gender roles such that *female reporters are less aggressive than their male counterparts*. This could occur either because female reporters as a group are predisposed toward less aggression, or because like other minorities at the workplace they face on-the-job pressures that can lead to underperformance (Kanter 1976). They may, for instance, restrain their aggressive impulses for fear that vigorous questioning will be judged differently—as “unfeminine”—and will attract negative sanctions. Indeed, some journalists’ memoirs express the view that women feel pressure to “soften” their behavior in the service of honoring the feminine ideal (Stahl 1999: 102).

The opposing hypothesis, that *female reporters are more aggressive than their male counterparts*, is suggested by a countervailing set of career self-selection processes and on-the-job pressures. Various studies find that women who pursue male-dominated occupations tend to differ from other women in having lower marriage and parenthood rates (Jagacinski 1987: 97), being more tough minded and assertive (Lemkau 1983), and seeing themselves as having more masculine characteristics (Moore and Rickel 1980). Such self-selection processes may be reinforced by a felt need among female journalists to prove themselves once on the job. Kanter (1976) proposed that overachievement is one typical response to the distinct performance pressures faced by minorities at the workplace, a process subsequently termed “the Avis Syndrome” on the basis that women and other minority group members perceive themselves to be under greater scrutiny and thus “try harder” (Sherman and Rosenblatt 1984). In this scenario, the demands of the professional role supersede traditional gender differences, resulting in conduct by female journalists that exceeds their male counterparts. Indeed, some of the more famous female members of the White House press corps—most notably, Helen Thomas—have reputations for being formidable questioners.

## Method

### *Database and Sampling Procedure*

The database runs from 1953 to 2000, a time frame that encompasses nine presidents from Eisenhower through Clinton, and that coincides with the emergence of the public presidential news conference. While earlier news conferences were essentially private encounters between presidents and journalists, beginning with Eisenhower the news conference became unconditionally quotable and hence fully public and “for the record” (Cornwell 1965; Smith 1990).

Using transcripts reprinted in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, four conferences were sampled per year from 1953 to 2000. The conferences were staggered quarterly over the course of each year—using February 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1 as starting dates, the first conference held after each date was selected. A temporally stratified sample was chosen to maximize the power to detect associations with time. Conferences held beyond White House grounds, and those involving other officials in addition to

the president, were excluded from the sample. Twenty-eight of 192 quarters (15 percent) contained no presidential news conferences, so this sampling procedure yielded a database of 164 conferences and 4,608 distinct questions.

### *Independent Variables*

Three journalist-level variables were examined. The first, status/medium, combines the print/broadcast distinction with an organizational prestige ranking. This variable is composed of three categories, which are represented by two indicators (broadcast, elite print) relative to a reference group (nonelite print). The first indicator, *broadcast*, coded all radio and television journalists as one and all print (newspaper, magazine, and wire service) journalists as zero. The second indicator, *elite print*, coded print journalists at major newspapers (specifically, *New York Times* and *Washington Post*) and major wire services (The Associated Press [AP], United Press International [UPI], and Reuters) as one and other print journalists (mostly those at local newspapers and regional news services) and all broadcast journalists as zero. Nonelite print journalists thus served as the reference group for both *broadcast* and *elite print*. Since the broadcast journalists in our sample consist almost entirely of those working for the three national TV network news programs, members of this category were conceived as having elite status. Accordingly, this variable has two high-status categories (broadcast, elite print) and one low-status category (nonelite print).

The second variable, *participation*, was dichotomized as an indicator of *frequent* participation (journalists who asked twenty or more questions in the data set) as opposed to infrequent participation (asked fewer than twenty questions in the data set). Finally, *gender* was represented with a *female* (1) as opposed to male (0) indicator.

*Missing values and imputation.* During the Eisenhower administration, conference transcripts in *Public Papers of the Presidents* identified each journalist-questioner. For all subsequent presidents, by contrast, journalists were often not identified in the transcripts, so identifications were made by visual examination of videotapes. Since this could not always be done with certainty, some post-Eisenhower journalists could not be definitively identified. This most frequently occurred when video was unavailable or when video was shot from behind the reporters (as it was for President George H. W. Bush). This resulted in some missing values for the three independent variables.

Gender and medium (missing in 7.7 percent and 30.2 percent of cases, respectively) were imputed as means of nonmissing cases within the combination of press conference and the other characteristic (gender or medium) when only one is missing and within press conference only when both are missing. Female was thus imputed as the proportion female within strata defined by press conference and, if available, broadcast medium. Broadcast medium was imputed analogously.

Imputation of frequent versus infrequent participation status, missing for 36 percent of cases, required a different, model-based procedure because it is likely that missingness is in part a function of the ease of identifying frequent versus infrequent participants. In particular, it is likely that coders were more familiar with recent journalists

**Table 1.** Independent Variables: Distribution (Percentage) of Questions across Journalists, after Imputation (76.2 Percent of Journalists Male Overall)

Participation	Gender	Status/Medium (%)			
		Broadcast	Elite Print	Nonelite Print	
Frequent	Male	7.7	7.1	4.2	30.5
	Female	3.4	4.7	3.5	
Infrequent	Male	13.0	20.2	24.9	69.5
	Female	2.4	3.9	5.2	
		26.4	35.7	37.8	100.0

(and therefore better able to identify them, increasing the count toward frequent participants) and that video made identification of frequent participants easier. The specific imputation approach is described in Appendix A. An analogous approach was used to impute elite status among print journalists.

*Distribution of journalist characteristics.* The distribution of journalists in terms of status/medium, participation, and gender appears in Table 1.

To check for collinearity across these variables, we calculated pairwise correlations among status/medium, gender, and participation. Broadcast and elite/print journalists are more likely to be frequent participants than nonelite/print journalists (46.8 percent frequent for broadcast journalists, 43.6 percent frequent for elite/print, and 29.4 percent frequent for nonelite/print, weighted by questions asked,  $p < 0.05$  for each of the first two vs. nonelite print), with no significant difference between broadcast and elite print ( $p = 0.464$ ). Female journalists are also more likely to be frequent participants than male journalists (53.7 percent frequent for female journalists vs. 36.9 percent for male journalists,  $p < 0.05$ ). Nonetheless, all three pairwise correlations among gender, medium, and participation were less than 0.20 in absolute value, so multicollinearity is not a concern. Females comprised 32.7 percent of frequent participants. Elite print journalists comprised 50.1 percent of frequent participants, broadcasts journalists 31.7 percent, and nonelite print journalists 18.2 percent.

### Dependent Variables

We consider three distinct dimensions of journalist behavior, which we will refer to under the rubric of “aggressive questioning” as a form of shorthand (Clayman et al. 2006, 2007)

1. Assertiveness—the extent to which questions invite a particular answer and are in that sense opinionated rather than neutral
2. Adversarialness—the extent to which questions pursue an agenda in opposition to the president or his administration

**Table 2.** Dependent Variables: Dimensions of Aggressive Questioning

Measure	Item (Indicator)	Description	Item Values	Item Kappa	Scale	Measure Kappa
Assertiveness	Preface tilt	Preface favors either yes or no	0 = No tilt 1 = Innocuous tilt 2 = Unfavorable tilt	0.67	Sum of two items	0.80
	Negative questions	“Isn’t it . . . ?” “Couldn’t you . . . ?”	0 = Not a negative question 1 = Negative question	0.94		
Adversarialness	Preface adversarialness	Question preface is oppositional	0 = Nonadversarial preface 1 = Adversarial preface focus of question 2 = Adversarial preface presupposed	0.79	Sum of two items	0.78
	Global adversarialness	Overall question is oppositional	0 = Not adversarial overall 1 = Adversarial overall	0.66		
Accountability	Accountability questions	Question seeks explanation for administration policy	0 = Not an accountability question 1 = “Why did you . . . ?” 2 = “How could you . . . ?”	0.76	Single item	0.76

3. Accountability—the extent to which questions explicitly ask the president to justify his policies or actions.

Each measure is operationalized in terms of various features of question design that serve as indicators (see Table 2). Below is a brief sketch of the measures and their indicators (for a fuller discussion, see Clayman et al. 2006; Clayman and Heritage 2002b).

**Assertiveness.** Assertiveness is measured only for questions inviting a yes/no answer ( $n = 2,519$ , 54.7 percent of all questions), for which the phenomenon is most easily assessed. Yes/no questions can be designed to invite or favor either a *yes-* or *no-*type response in two distinct ways: (1) through a prefatory statement (i.e., “*Unemployment rose sharply last month. Are we in an economic downturn?*”) or (2) through the linguistic form of the question itself, which can be negatively formulated (i.e., “*Aren’t we in an economic downturn?*”) and thus tilted in favor of *yes*.

**Adversarialness.** An oppositional stance can be encoded (1) in the preface to the question only or (2) in the design of the question as a whole. Question prefaces were coded as adversarial if they disagreed with the president or were explicitly critical of the administration. Questions as a whole were coded as adversarial when an oppositional or critical posture ran through the question in its entirety. For instance, an adversarial preface may be the *focus of a subsequent question* that treats the preface as debatable (i.e., “*You’ve been called reckless and irresponsible. What is your response to that?*”), so that the question as a whole is not adversarial. On the other hand, when the subsequent question *presupposes the truth of the preface* (i.e., “*You’ve been called*

reckless and irresponsible. What policy choices might explain this reaction?"), both the preface and the question as a whole would be coded as adversarial.

**Accountability.** Accountability is operationalized as questions that explicitly ask the president to defend and justify his policies. Because such questions decline to accept policy at face value, they are to some extent aggressive, although the degree of aggressiveness depends on the linguistic form of the question. *Why did you*-type questions invite a justification without prejudice, whereas *How could you*-type questions are accusatory, implying an attitude of doubt or skepticism regarding the president's capacity to adequately defend his actions. Note that accountability, unlike the other measures, has a single indicator—the occurrence of *why did you/how could you*-type questions.

Most of the underlying features of question design on which the scales are based were derived from prior research on demonstrably aggressive modes of question design in journalism and other contexts (Clayman and Heritage 2002a). For the measures involving multiple indicators (assertiveness, adversarialness), discrete indicators were combined into a single composite measure or scale, with higher values corresponding to more aggressive practices or multiple practices used in combination (see Clayman et al. 2006). We interpret these scales as ordinal variables. The scales are validated both as constructs and as indicators of aggressiveness per se (Clayman et al. 2006).

As for reliability, coding was performed by a team of fourteen coders working in pairs, with decisions requiring consensus and problem cases resolved in weekly meetings involving the entire research team. Reliability was assessed by a joint recoding of a subsample of ten conferences, and evaluated using Cohen's kappa. Kappa scores exceeded 0.75 for all three composite measures, which is generally understood to indicate at least 90 percent agreement (and even greater agreement for coding categories with few codes; see Bakeman et al. 1997).

## Covariates

Clayman et al. (2007) developed a multivariate ordinal logistic regression model of these modes of aggressive questioning based on various social conditions. The final such model predicted questioning behavior from (1) the unemployment rate, (2) the prime interest rate, (3) a foreign policy topic indicator, (4) a second term indicator, and (5) the time of the press conference. These five factors serve as covariates here.

## Statistical Analyses

We began by investigating the main effects of three journalist characteristics—status/medium, participation, and gender—on three dimensions of aggressive questioning (assertiveness, adversarialness, and accountability). Three ordinal logistic regression models predicted these dimensions of questioning from the three journalist attributes, together with the five contextual covariates outlined above.

Next we examined whether the effects of journalist characteristics changed over time, using two different parameterizations of time. To test for linear changes in effects of journalist characteristics over time, we ran a second series of three models that added interaction terms for each of the three journalist attributes with time (Status/Medium  $\times$  Time, Participation  $\times$  Time, Gender  $\times$  Time). For those interactions that proved to be significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), we further tested for punctuated change over time. This possibility was suggested by previous research (Clayman et al. 2010) identifying 1969 as a watershed moment or turning point in the rise of aggressive questioning. Thus, to test for punctuated change in the relative assertiveness of categories of journalists over time, we replace the linear time term with a post-1968 indicator (equal to one for 1969 or later and zero for 1968 or earlier) within each of the interaction terms. To further investigate whether 1969 was the appropriate change point, separate models tested for linear gender trends within the periods both before and after this proposed change point (1953–1968, 1969–2000).

We then examined whether journalist attributes interact with one another in their effects on aggressive questioning—whether there are nonadditive effects of status/medium, gender, and participation. An additional series of three models tested for all three possible two-way interaction effects among status/medium, participation, and gender by adding these three interaction terms to each of the main effects models.

Finally, we took a closer look at individual high-participation journalists to see how they compared with the larger population of infrequent participants. A final series of three models used the five contextual covariates and thirty-one dummies as predictors, with each dummy corresponding to a specific frequent participant. To account for imputed probabilities of (generic) frequent participants, these models also included a variable that was zero for identified frequent participants and that contained the imputed probability of being a frequent participant for unidentified journalists (using the same imputations for participation described earlier).

## Results

### *What Were the Main Effects of Journalist Attributes on Aggressive Questioning?*

As Table 3 indicates, after controlling for context, the three focal journalist attributes—status/medium, participation, and gender—have no main effect associations with either assertiveness or accountability. In other words, neither of these two dimensions of aggressive questioning differs overall by gender, medium, or participation over the 1953–2000 period as a whole. However, female gender and frequent participation were each independently associated with greater adversarialness ( $p < 0.05$  and  $p < 0.001$ , respectively). Averaging over 1953–2000, women were typically more adversarial than men, and frequent participants were typically more adversarial than infrequent participants.

**Table 3.** Main Effects of Journalist Attributes on Aggressive Questioning

	Assertiveness	Adversarialness	Accountability
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
Broadcast	1.25 (0.95, 1.65)	1.09 (0.83, 1.42)	1.02 (0.70, 1.49)
Elite/print	1.10 (0.85, 1.44)	0.82 (0.62, 1.08)	0.86 (0.58, 1.28)
Frequent	0.99 (0.79, 1.23)	1.53 (1.23, 1.90)***	1.26 (0.93, 1.71)
Female	1.24 (0.99, 1.54)	1.29 (1.04, 1.61)*	1.09 (0.81, 1.47)

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 4.** Interaction Effects of Journalist Attributes and Time (per Four Years)

	Assertiveness	Adversarialness	Accountability
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
Broadcast $\times$ Time	1.00 (0.91, 1.09)	1.00 (0.91, 1.10)	0.98 (0.85, 1.13)
Elite Print $\times$ Time	0.94 (0.87, 1.01)	1.08 (0.98, 1.19)	0.98 (0.86, 1.11)
Frequent $\times$ Time	1.04 (0.97, 1.11)	0.99 (0.92, 1.06)	1.08 (0.97, 1.20)
Female $\times$ Time	0.91 (0.85, 0.98)*	0.97 (0.90, 1.05)	0.92 (0.82, 1.03)

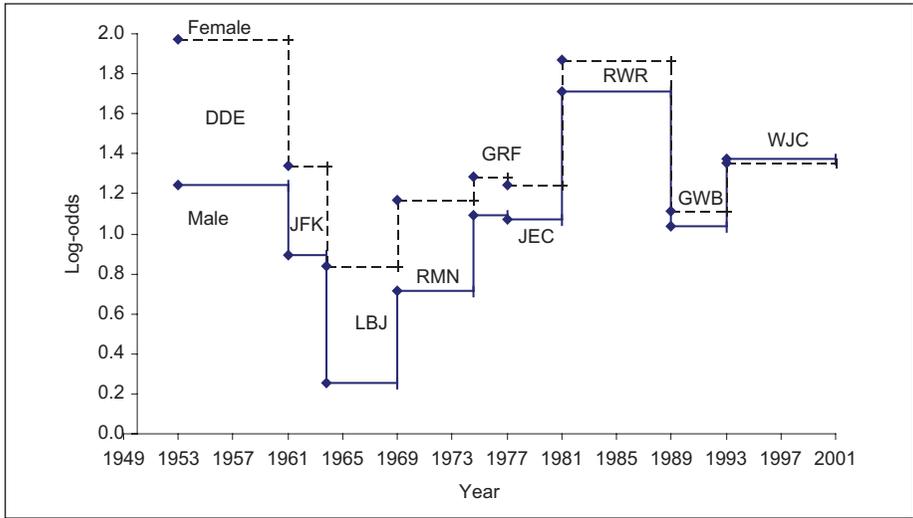
Note: Model includes controls for five covariates (unemployment rate, the prime interest rate, a foreign policy topic indicator, a second-term indicator, and the time of the press conference) and medium status and gender main effects (coefficients not shown).

\* $p < 0.05$ .

### *Do These Effects Vary over Time?*

As can be seen in Table 4, of twelve interactions of journalist characteristics with linear time, one was statistically significant—a negative association of female gender with time (OR = 0.91 per four years,  $p < 0.05$ ) for assertiveness. In the context of this model, the main effect of female (OR = 2.50,  $p < 0.01$ , not shown) refers to female–male differences in the initial year of the data (1953). Thus, while there was no evidence that female journalists were more assertive than men overall across 1953–2000 (Table 3), there is evidence that female journalists were generally more assertive than men in 1953, a difference that declined over time. The absence of interactions of female gender or frequent participation with time for the adversarialness outcome, by contrast, suggests that the tendency for greater adversarialness from female and frequent participants have been relatively constant over 1953–2000.

Given the evidence of change in the association of journalist gender with assertiveness over time, we investigated whether this change was more consistent with gradual (linear) change or a punctuated change in the relative assertiveness of male and female



**Figure 1.** Adjusted log-odds of assertiveness by administration, relative to the 1953–2000 average

journalists after 1968. The model that described this interaction as a punctuated change point provided a better fit than a model of linear change (in terms of log likelihood) with the same predictor degrees of freedom. This punctuated model (not shown) found significantly higher assertiveness for females than males pre-1969 ( $OR = 2.22, SE = 0.56, p < 0.01$ ) and a significant negative interaction with a post-1968 indicator ( $OR = 0.49, SE = 0.13, p < 0.01$ ), suggesting a reduction in female assertiveness relative to males post-1968, when compared to pre-1969. More specifically, there was no evidence of greater assertiveness for female rather than male journalists post-1968 ( $OR = 1.07, p > 0.05$ ).

To further investigate whether 1969 was the appropriate change point, two separate models tested for linear gender trends in assertiveness before and after this proposed change point. There was no evidence that the association of gender with assertiveness changed within 1953–1968 ( $p = 0.758$ ) or within 1969–2000 ( $p = 0.921$ ), further supporting that the gender shift was a punctuated change in 1969 more than a gradual change before or after that time.

A visual representation of these trends in gender differences in assertiveness over time appears as Figure 1, which displays the adjusted log odds of assertiveness by administration (relative to the 1953–2000 average) separately for female and male journalists. As can be seen, females were substantially more assertive than males from 1953 to 1968, with parallel declines in assertiveness that maintained this gender differential. The parallelism ended during 1969 to 1974 when male assertiveness rose faster than female assertiveness, and throughout the 1969–2000 period there were no significant gender differences in assertiveness for any administration ( $p > 0.05$  for all).

**Table 5.** Interaction Effects for Journalist Attributes

Frequency	Status/Medium	Gender	Outcomes		
			Assertiveness	Adversarialness	Accountability
			OR (CI)	OR (CI)	OR (CI)
Infrequent	Elite print	Male	1.00 (n.a.)	1.00 (n.a.)	1.00 (n.a.)
		Female	0.85 (0.46, 1.59)	0.72 (0.36, 1.46)	0.87 (0.35, 2.14)
	Nonelite print	Male	0.77 (0.53, 1.12)	1.18 (0.77, 1.81)	1.34 (0.76, 2.37)
		Female	1.24 (0.75, 2.03)	0.66 (0.35, 1.24)	0.45 (0.18, 1.16)
	Broadcast	Male	1.02 (0.68, 1.54)	1.46 (0.94, 2.26)	0.99 (0.53, 1.86)
		Female	1.14 (0.63, 2.09)	1.68 (0.90, 3.12)	0.97 (0.37, 2.52)
Frequent	Elite print	Male	1.02 (0.65, 1.61)	1.23 (0.73, 2.06)	1.09 (0.54, 2.21)
		Female	0.86 (0.51, 1.44)	2.10 (1.30, 3.39)**	1.21 (0.61, 2.41)
	Nonelite print	Male	0.49 (0.28, 0.86)*	1.29 (0.70, 2.36)	0.82 (0.32, 2.09)
		Female	1.67 (1.00, 2.79)*	4.06 (2.48, 6.67)**	1.85 (0.88, 3.91)
	Broadcast	Male	1.18 (0.76, 1.82)	1.41 (0.90, 2.21)	1.03 (0.55, 1.93)
		Female	0.89 (0.48, 1.65)	2.18 (1.30, 3.65)**	2.39 (1.25, 4.58)**

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

### Do Journalist Attributes Interact with One Another?

Table 5 considers two-way interactions among frequency of participation, gender, and status/medium. For ease of comparison, we constructed 12 mutually exclusive categories corresponding to all possible combinations of these variables. Table 5 employs the most common category, *infrequently participating males employed by elite print organizations*, as a reference category so that, for example, the odds ratio of 1.14 for infrequently participating females employed by broadcast organizations (for the assertiveness outcome) compares this group to the reference group of male infrequent elite/print journalists. As can be seen in Table 5, none of the five other subtypes of *infrequently participating* journalists differs from the reference group on any of the three outcomes ( $p > 0.05$  for all), suggesting that the behavior of infrequently participating journalists is relatively uniform, and that differences by gender and status/medium are largely limited to frequent participants. Among frequent participants, male broadcast and male elite/print journalists do not differ from the reference group on any outcome ( $p > 0.05$  for each). Frequently participating nonelite males differ from the reference group only in being less assertive (OR = 0.49,  $p < 0.05$ ). In contrast, all three status/medium subgroups of frequently participating female journalists are more aggressive than the reference group on one or more measures. Frequently participating elite print females are significantly more adversarial (OR = 2.10,  $p < 0.01$ ); frequently participating nonelite print females are both more adversarial (OR = 4.06,  $p < 0.01$ ) and more assertive (OR = 1.67,  $p < 0.05$ ); and frequently participating broadcast females

are significantly more adversarial and require more accountability (ORs = 2.18 and 2.39, respectively,  $p < 0.01$  for each).

From Table 3, the simpler (main effects) model of adversarialness found greater adversarialness for female and high-participation journalists than male and low participation. This more refined model finds that these effects are not additive. In particular, journalists who are both female and frequent participants are especially likely to be adversarial—more so than would be predicted from the additive effects of female gender and frequent participation. Moreover, individual contrasts within this model (not shown) find no greater adversarialness for low-participation female journalists or for high-participation male journalists than for a reference group of low-participation male journalists ( $p > 0.05$  for each), but show that high-participation female journalists (those who are both) are considerably more adversarial than low-participation male journalists (OR = 2.59,  $p < 0.001$ ). This finding suggests that only high participation female journalists were driving the two independent main effects found earlier.

Correspondingly, while the simpler (main effects) model of accountability in Table 3 found no overall main effects for either gender or participation, this more refined model finds that gender associations with accountability depend on participation ( $p < 0.01$ ). In particular, among infrequent participants, questions from female journalists demand less accountability than questions from male journalists (OR = 0.57,  $p < 0.05$ ), but no such difference exists among frequent participants (not shown, OR = 1.53 for females relative to males,  $p = 0.12$ ). This interaction again suggests that the relative aggressiveness of female journalists vis-à-vis males is higher among frequent participants.

### *How Do Individual High-Participation Journalists Compare to Low-Participation Journalists?*

Table 6 displays the coefficients for individual high-participation journalists, grouped by status/medium and gender. Of thirty-one high-participation journalists, eight were significantly *more* aggressive than low-participation journalists on at least one measure (three of these were more aggressive on two measures), while only two were *less* aggressive on one measure.

The measurably different frequent participants are most strongly differentiated by gender. Of 22 high-participation male journalists, four (18 percent) were more aggressive than low-participation journalists on at least one outcome, and two were less aggressive on one outcome. The more aggressive males were spread across the status/medium categories—one was elite print (more assertive and adversarial), one was nonelite print (more adversarial), and two were broadcasters (one more adversarial, the other demanded more accountability)—while the two less aggressive males were both nonelite print (both less assertive).

Of nine high-participation female journalists, four (44 percent) were more aggressive on at least one outcome, and none was less aggressive. Of the four more aggressive females, one was elite print (more adversarial), one was nonelite print (more assertive

**Table 6.** Individual High-Participation Journalists

	Assertiveness	Adversarialness	Accountability
	OR (CI)	OR (CI)	OR (CI)
Elite print, male			
Cormier	0.75 (0.24, 2.32)	0.55 (0.16, 1.84)	0.84 (0.20, 3.65)
Folliard	2.32 (0.56, 9.66)	2.82 (0.79, 10.02)	0.00 (n.a.)
Gertzengang	0.81 (0.27, 2.48)	1.89 (0.88, 4.04)	0.77 (0.18, 3.36)
Hunt	0.90 (0.41, 1.97)	0.83 (0.37, 1.87)	1.21 (0.47, 3.17)
Reston	0.23 (0.03, 1.85)	1.11 (0.14, 8.64)	0.00 (n.a.)
Roberts	0.51 (0.11, 2.34)	0.00 (n.a.)	0.00 (n.a.)
Scali	6.63 (1.66, 26.55)**	4.04 (1.14, 14.37)*	2.37 (0.30, 18.7)
Smith	1.42 (0.58, 3.47)	0.00 (n.a.)	0.00 (n.a.)
Wilson	0.61 (0.16, 2.29)	2.87 (0.80, 10.28)	0.00 (n.a.)
Elite print, female			
Thomas	0.99 (0.63, 1.56)	1.87 (1.28, 2.74)***	1.27 (0.73, 2.23)
Nonelite print, male			
Brandt	0.38 (0.13, 1.15)	0.94 (0.22, 4.08)	0.80 (0.10, 6.13)
Emory	0.65 (0.17, 2.53)	6.68 (2.61, 17.11)***	2.83 (0.78, 10.26)
Lisagor	0.23 (0.05, 1.00)*	1.00 (0.34, 2.93)	0.60 (0.08, 4.50)
O'Rourke	0.22 (0.05, 0.98)*	0.00 (n.a.)	0.49 (0.07, 1.00)
Sperling	1.97 (0.66, 5.84)	0.60 (0.18, 2.04)	0.00 (n.a.)
Nonelite print, female			
Craig	1.79 (0.72, 4.46)	0.00 (n.a.)	1.32 (0.17, 10.25)
McClendon	1.78 (1.06, 2.99)*	4.01 (2.65, 6.09)***	1.82 (0.94, 3.56)
Broadcast, male			
Bierbauer	1.75 (0.58, 5.26)	1.05 (0.35, 3.14)	0.92 (0.21, 4.07)
Blitzer	0.33 (0.04, 2.66)	0.73 (0.16, 3.21)	3.77 (1.21, 11.72)*
Donaldson	1.19 (0.62, 2.28)	1.16 (0.66, 2.03)	0.39 (0.12, 1.28)
Hume	1.82 (0.68, 4.83)	1.85 (0.73, 4.71)	1.05 (0.24, 4.61)
Maer	0.60 (0.12, 2.98)	0.59 (0.13, 2.57)	0.00 (n.a.)
Morgan	0.91 (0.34, 2.45)	2.74 (1.10, 6.810)*	2.67 (0.78, 9.13)
Plante	0.90 (0.39, 2.08)	0.98 (0.44, 2.14)	1.93 (0.83, 4.52)
Wallace	2.39 (0.70, 8.17)	1.46 (0.52, 4.05)	0.93 (0.21, 4.12)
Broadcast, female			
Braver	1.74 (0.40, 7.61)	5.11 (2.03, 12.87)***	2.01 (0.44, 9.09)
Cochran	2.29 (0.81, 6.46)	1.40 (0.56, 3.51)	0.42 (0.06, 3.15)
Liasson	0.96 (0.23, 3.98)	0.76 (0.22, 2.60)	0.74 (0.10, 5.70)
Mitchell	1.53 (0.69, 3.40)	3.44 (1.85, 6.38)***	4.13 (2.07, 8.25)***
Stahl	0.35 (0.08, 1.62)	1.22 (0.45, 3.32)	1.41 (0.41, 4.82)
Woodruff	0.00 (0.24, 2.32)	0.26 (0.03, 1.94)	1.93 (0.55, 6.84)
Other frequent	0.44 (0.17, 1.13)	0.29 (0.11, 0.81)*	0.79 (0.20, 3.65)

Note: *n.a.* indicates that the journalist in question was scored in the least aggressive category for all questions for this measure. This is likely to indicate that the journalist is significantly low on this measure, but this is not easily tested in the ordinal logistic regression framework.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

and adversarial), and two were broadcasters (one was more adversarial, the other was more adversarial and demanded more accountability).

Only minimal clustering may be observed in relation to the status/medium categories. The measurably *more* aggressive journalists are distributed across all three categories, with two of eight broadcast journalists, two of ten elite print journalists, and two of seven nonelite print journalists significantly more aggressive on at least one measure. However, both of the measurably *less* aggressive journalists were from nonelite print organizations, and both were less assertive in their questioning.

Summarizing across categories, the only two journalists with significantly high demands for accountability were both broadcast journalists. Assertiveness was significantly high for two journalists and significantly low for two journalists, and both of the less assertive journalists were nonelite print journalists. Adversarialness was significantly high for seven journalists, of whom three were broadcasters, two were elite print, and two were nonelite print. Four of nine high-participation female journalists (44 percent) but only four of twenty-two high-participation male journalists (18 percent) were significantly high on at least one measure of aggressiveness (and two high-participation male journalists were significantly low on one measure). In total, three journalists were significantly high on two measures of aggressiveness, five more were significantly high on one measure, and two high-participation journalists were significantly less aggressive on one measure.

The two highest-participation female journalists, Helen Thomas and Sarah McClendon asked a total of 332 questions in our data, representing 30.2 percent of the 1,097 questions asked by female journalists. The two highest-participation male journalists, Sam Donaldson and Terrence Hunt, asked a total of 159 questions in our data, representing 4.5 percent of the 3,512 questions asked by male journalists. Both Thomas and McClendon were among the four most aggressive female journalists, whereas neither Donaldson nor Hunt was significantly more aggressive.

The four most aggressive female journalists asked a total of 410 questions in our data compared to 115 questions asked by the four most aggressive male journalists. Thus, questions from the most aggressive journalists comprised 37.3 percent of all questions asked by female journalists but only 3.3 percent of all questions by male journalists.

## Discussion

Of the three attributes investigated in this study, the one that had received the most attention in previous research—the intertwined dimension of organizational status and medium—turns out to be the least consequential dimension of variation here. While broadcast, elite print, and nonelite print reporters may be differentially aggressive in other environments and in other modes of journalistic practice, within presidential news conferences they are only minimally distinguishable.

On the other hand, previously unexamined attributes of participation and gender turn out to be more consequential here. Regarding participation, the results are most

consistent with the hypothesis that frequent participants are in the aggregate more aggressive than infrequent participants. This may be interpreted as lending support to the idea that greater interpersonal familiarity emboldens journalists in their direct encounters with the president. It may also be an indication of a professional reward system—that aggressive journalists are being promoted up the ranks to regular White House correspondent and are given more opportunities to take part in high-visibility presidential news conferences. Further research will be needed to adjudicate between these possibilities. However, the evidence already in hand offers no support for the opposing hypothesis, that familiarity breeds empathy, cozy relations, and hence greater deference toward the president.

For gender, the results are most consistent with the hypothesis that female journalists as a group are more aggressive than their male counterparts. This in turn lends support to the idea that the occupational role of White House correspondent supersedes traditional gender differences. It would appear that some combination of self-selection into this role, the preferences of occupational gatekeepers, and on-the-job pressures to overperform—the Avis phenomenon—result in female correspondents tending to exhibit greater interrogative vigorosity than their male counterparts.

Generalizations regarding the impact of both participation and gender must be tempered by the recognition that for some outcomes, these dimensions of variation are mainly significant in interaction with one another. Most notably, for adversarialness, the subset of journalists who are both high-participation and female appear to account for much of the aggregate gender and participation differences described above. While the ubiquitous Helen Thomas has been an enduring presence within this group, this pattern is by no means wholly reducible to her influence. Indeed, analysis of individual journalists reveals that nearly half of the high-participation females in our data set (four of nine) were significantly more adversarial than the larger population of low-participation journalists.

For another dimension of aggressiveness, however—specifically assertiveness—the effect of gender is *not* contingent on participation, although it *is* contingent on a process of historical change. Female journalists were consistently and significantly more assertive than males throughout the first three administrations examined here (1953–1968), but after converging somewhat during the Nixon administration they became indistinguishable throughout the remaining years examined (1975–2000). Thus, notwithstanding the aggregate similarity of males and females in assertiveness, the two groups were once measurably distinct and have converged over time.

How might this gender convergence be explained? One possibility is that the male-dominated occupation of White House correspondent has become more gender-integrated over time, thereby eroding the effects of gender segregation on male/female behavior patterns. This explanation is plausible on its face—U.S. journalism has, in general, grown more gender-integrated in recent decades (Robinson 2005; Weaver et al. 2006). On the other hand, the abruptness of the convergence following the Nixon administration suggests an alternative explanation involving the impact of that turbulent historical era on the White House press corps. Previous research (Clayman et al.

2010) demonstrates that the late 1960s were a turning point or watershed moment in the evolution of the White House press corps, a moment when the norms of questioning underwent an enduring shift toward greater aggressiveness. Now it is clear that, following the same historic juncture, previously differentiated subgroups within the press corps (males and females) converged in their conduct. Perhaps the gender convergence observed here reflects a much more general (i.e., not gender specific) type of process, namely, the unification of the White House press corps in response to political turbulence and a breach of trust in the president–press relationship. Further research will be necessary to determine whether the press corps in general exhibited less variation and more unity in conduct after this point. For now, we note that the gender convergence begun in the post-1968 era has persisted for at least three decades.

The analysis of individual journalists, in conjunction with other patterns, is suggestive of a gatekeeping process governing membership in the elite White House press corps and participation in high-profile news conferences that varies by gender. Whereas aggressive behavior appears to be rewarded to some extent among male journalists, as evidenced by somewhat greater aggressive behavior by high-participation male journalists than low-participation journalists, aggressive behavior is rewarded to a much greater extent among female journalists. Correspondingly, these same data may be viewed as suggesting that nonaggressive male journalists (those not significantly above average on at least one measure of aggressiveness) have significantly greater opportunity for participation than nonaggressive female journalists, with the former group asking 74 percent of all recorded questions and the latter group asking only 15 percent. This view is particularly reinforced by the fact that the only two high-participation journalists who were significantly less aggressive than low-participation journalists on any measure were both male. However, because participation is (as noted earlier) intertwined with various social processes other than occupational gatekeeping—including interpersonal familiarity—this interpretation should be regarded as speculative.

In summary, this initial exploration of the composition and functioning of the White House press corps indicates that, notwithstanding substantial similarities across journalists, they are by no means interchangeable. The vigorousness with which they question the president varies systematically by participation levels and by gender. Although these findings are confined to the presidential news conference context, they suggest that various aspects of news production and forms of news output may be shaped by such attributes of journalists, and perhaps other attributes not yet examined.

## **Appendix A**

### *Imputation of Frequent Participation Variable*

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We assume that in the year 2000 all of the frequent participants were correctly identified when video was present, but that in all other circumstances 1961–1999 (or 2000 without video), some frequent participants were missed. We estimate the rate of detection as the ratio of the model-based prediction of “frequent” from a logistic

regression described below to the rate of famousness predicted in the same model with video in 2000.

A logistic regression model of 1961–2000 data predicting 1 = question asked by a journalist defined as a frequent participant vs. 0 = question asked by anyone else from linear time, an indicator of whether a videotape was present, and their interaction shows that (1) the proportion of questioners who were identified as frequent participants increased over time ( $p < 0.05$ ), (2) the proportion of questioners who were identified as frequent participants was greater when a video was present ( $p < 0.05$ ), and (3) there was a positive interaction ( $p < 0.05$ ) such that the tendency toward more identification as frequent with video was more pronounced in more recent years. This set of findings implied the following imputation scheme for the frequent participation variable:

1. No imputation of *frequent* for 1953–1960 or cases where the medium of the journalist could be identified, because in these cases the identity of the journalist was not in question.
2. In other cases, we impute a probability of frequent  $x_i = [o_i \times (1 - m_i)] / [(m_i) \times u_i]$  for administration  $i$ , where  $o_i$  is the observed proportion of questions asked by frequent participants in the administration,  $m_i$  is the model-based (ratio) estimate of the proportion of all frequent cases that are identified, and  $u_i$  is the proportion of cases in that administration for which the medium is unknown (a proxy for the identity of the journalist being unknown).

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