

## **Who Criticizes the Government in the Media? The Symbolic Power Model**

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### **Abstract**

The existing literature on the media's role in criticizing the government is somewhat slim. While it pays ample attention to the process where the media mediate information to the public (Davis 2002, Thompson 2000), it is unclear who they mediate it from. This article is focused on media claims making critical remarks about the government.

Public criticism is an important topic of research because it sets the range of disputable issues. It may affect the shaping of the government agenda. It warns the government of potential social tensions. In the best case scenario, public criticism enhances democracy as it gives voice to those disgruntled parts of the population, who cannot voice their dissatisfaction with the government through official channels of accountability. Public criticism should eventually increase electoral responsibility. It can swing public opinion and affect the chances of reelection of the government. Finally, media criticism of the government enhances transparency and enables the flow of information. This in turn allows citizens to make more informed choices.

Given the importance of public criticism of the government, it is surprising how little attention the topic has received. The broad contents of media coverage have been widely analyzed, but specific criticisms of the establishment have not. In this paper, I analyze five models attributing various degrees of journalistic involvement in initiating criticism at the government- indexing theory, the Fourth Estate ideal, the social responsibility theory, the propaganda model and political parallelism. The paper advances a symbolic power model, which emphasizes the importance of the media as an arena for gaining political capital and public support. It tests the model on an original database containing about 6000 articles of accusations in Bulgaria, Germany and Russia in the period between 1995 and 2005.

### **Who Levels Media Allegations at the Government? A Theoretical Overview of Five Theories**

Indexing theory offers the most direct and elaborate theoretical treatment of the issue of government criticism in the media. The core idea of indexing theory is that "journalists index the range of viewpoints in the news to the divisions of power they perceive within various decision-making circles of government" (Bennett et al 2007, p.217). Journalists are most likely to report the viewpoints of the government. It excludes sources of criticism situated outside the government, such as public opinion and think tanks. It is very clear: politicians, not journalists, dictate the media agenda and thus poses a definite challenge to the vast literature of the media as an agenda setter.

Why would journalists willingly "index" the views of the establishment in a perfectly democratic setting? Although the theory does not segregate the journalistic motivation so distinctly, one can distinguish two

types of motivations behind the indexing practice - rational and irrational. The rational arguments include the following considerations: The establishment is the most reliable constant and complete source of information- after all, journalists cannot know what is happening around the globe at any one point in time; Taking cues from the government is most economical, especially in view of the journalists' limited resources; Indexing inter-governmental debates makes most sense because it reflects the views of the most powerful players, who are the only ones who can affect any sort of outcome; A subservient attitude guarantees the journalists that they will continue to be privy to the innermost workings of power; It is a safe practice.

Apart from these very rational considerations, the *Zeitgeist* plays a role in the journalists' decision to index governmental news, too. It comes in two forms. On the one hand, the *Zeitgeist* is a part of the Washington consensus. Journalists believe that a democratic government automatically polices itself. In case it fails to do so, the journalists should still try to report what the governments say and let the people form their own opinions (Bennett 1990, p.109). On the other hand, the *Zeitgeist* refers to the common ways of life that bind politicians and journalists together. These include attending the same parties, living in the same parts of Washington area, sending their children to the same schools (Bennett et al 2007, p.149). In case all these considerations fail, then comes the metaphysical idea that reality is malleable and there is no objective standard to prove that the government is wrong (Bennett 1990, p.109)?

Indexing theory is the most relevant and up-to-date account of media criticism. Yet, it leaves several questions open. Althaus *et al* argue that "the terms used to describe the hypothesized central engine of media discourse- *mainstream government debate* or *official debate*- require further refinement. We should distinguish three ways of segmenting U.S. elites: governing elites as a whole; the executive branch or administration... and oppositional officials, whom the media generally identify among members of the opposition party in Congress" (Althaus *et al* 1996, p.408). As the authors point out, it is entirely possible that the distribution of policy views in the news is governed more by one segment than by the other, by a weighted average of the two, or by some other rule. Thus it is very important to distinguish between the relative involvement of the opposition and government within the "official debate" as they affect the quality of public scrutiny and accountability.

The second issue is whether the news would reflect government opinions so closely if we *did not sample all the news but examined the critical coverage only*. It makes sense that the government will dominate the informational part of the media discourse as it has most direct access to information (unlike the opposition). But the crux of our research question considers government criticism only, not to the whole range of media discourse. We currently lack a study with such a narrow focus. And it is important to have one if we are to determine the exact role of the opposition as a public critic.

The third issue is how indexing theory would fare beyond the Washington consensus. The theory argues that the U.S. government has many mechanisms for holding journalists under its spell- regular press briefings, access to exclusive parties, an elaborate PR machine, experienced and savvy spokespeople. There is also the unspoken feeling that both journalists and the politicians play an important and, arguably, democratic game. But in other countries, where the government is not so accessible, and the spirit of democracy is not so tangible, would indexing theory still apply?

While indexing theory believes that the government initiates the media agenda, it faces opposition from four theories that are likely to disagree.<sup>1</sup> The Fourth Estate concept and the social responsibility theory argue that the journalists are the most active critics of the government. The propaganda model believes that the owners of media outlets are the most important determinants of government criticism. The political parallelism model suggests that political pressure is the single most important determinant of media criticism. Given these differences in predictions, it is important to examine briefly the reasoning behind them. The table below summarizes the main points of the five views on public critics of the government.

Table 1: Comparison of Five Theories Related to Sources of Media Criticism of the Government

Aspect of the Concept	Indexing Theory	Fourth Estate	Social Responsibility Theory	Propaganda Model	Political Parallelism
Likely public critics	Government	Journalists	Journalists	Government sources, private firms, NGOs	Parties (but not necessarily the political opposition)
Authorship	W. Lance Bennett	Edmund Burke	Siebert, Peterson, Schram	Herman and Chomsky	Hallin and Mancini
Year of origination	1990	Originally 1787 and thereafter, much in use since 1970s	1956	1994	2004
Chief Force	Not specified	Professionalization	Professionalization	Commercialization	Instrumentalization
Chief Developments	Not specified	abolition of stamp taxes, licensing and censorship; First Amendment	Creation of the Federal Communications Commission, 1927	Concentration of ownership of the media	Rise and establishment of political parties
Rationale	Idealistic and materialistic notion of journalism	Idealistic notion of public interest	Collectivist vision of society	Materialist vision of societal relations	Political forces underpin societal relations
What drives	Politics and	Idealism	Idealism	Wealth	Politics

<sup>1</sup> None of the theories states directly who is most likely to criticize the government in public, but the identity of the critics can be inferred.

the criticisms	Idealism				
<b>Relation to State</b>	Journalists are almost entirely subservient to the views of the establishment.	Journalists take a distance from the state to criticize them	The state "comes back in" to protect journalists against the intrusion of commercial media.	The state and wealthy firms collude to capture the media for their own purposes.	The state is only a factor as long as it is ruled by a party rules it.

Two major theories- the view of the media as the Fourth Estate and the social responsibility theory- put a high premium on the media's potential to raise public concerns about executive misconduct. The key underlying notion that unites these theories is the idea of the professionalization of the media. These theories came at different times and were seemingly unrelated. The concept of the media as the Fourth Estate arose in the 18th century, whereas the social responsibility theory took shape at the beginning of the 20th century. The term Fourth Estate is attributed to Edmund Burke who used it to refer to the new practice of press reporting in the House of Commons in 1787. Parliamentary reporters have come to be known as the Fourth Estate.<sup>2</sup> The gradual assertion of the media as the Fourth Estate has gone through several stages, such as the abolition of stamp taxes, licensing and censorship and the First Amendment.

The social responsibility theory was bourn out of the creation of the Federal Communications Commission in 1927 and the Communications Act of 1934. The commission arose mainly to regulate the airwaves as radio stations sprouted up in chaotic profusion in the early 1920s. The Federal Communications Commission took the position that it was responsible for supervising over-all program content to insure its serving of the public interest. The Commission has said that "radio be maintained as a medium of free speech for the general public as a whole rather than as an outlet for purely personal or private interests" (Peterson, p.84).

In principle, both views of the media- the fourth estate and the social responsibility- propound a very idealistic vision of the media as an objective and independent observer of the government affairs. But these theories arose in response to two different types of shortcomings in the system. The Fourth Estate ideal tried to fill in the gap made by illiteracy, limited suffrage, and limited political rights. The social responsibility theory was the response to the commercialized nature of the media market and the news dominated by private economic interests.

Another difference between the theories is their attitude to the state. Whereas the Fourth Estate concept saw the government as its chief enemy, the social responsibility theory thought that the biggest enemy to free press are the commercial interests. The Fourth Estate was meant to create some distance between

<sup>2</sup> The traditional three estates of parliament are the Lords Spiritual, the Lords Temporal, and the Commons.

the public interest and the government, whereas the social responsibility theory was created to bring the government back in to defend the public interest against commercial interests.

Despite the differences in their timing, relationship to the government and reason for origination, both the Fourth Estate idea and the social responsibility theory envision the journalists as an independent critic of the government. The social responsibility theory argues for a "sense of accountability to the public... and a sense of mission requiring it to serve the general welfare" (Peterson, pp.82-83). Similarly, "the Fourth Estate ideal at its most basic holds that the role of the news media is to act as a conduit of information, ideas and opinions to assist in the good governance of society; to act as a check on the powerful, by reporting, analyzing and criticizing their actions on behalf of the public, which lacks direct access to information or power" (Schultz 1998: 51).

The idea that the journalists are watchdogs of the public interest has been discredited for three main reasons. First, it is hard to argue that the public interest as such exists. Second, if the press is a public watchdog, that means that the public should own it, and this is clearly not the case (Merrill 1974 cited in Schultz, p.54). Third, it has been argued that the public service orientation of journalism just concealed other less altruistic ends (Hallin et al, p.36).

The most robust theory that challenges the view that the journalists are independent checks on the government is the propaganda model. The propaganda model is premised on the notion of commercialization of the media market. It argues that "money and power are able to filter out the news, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public...Private interests dominate the media agenda by controlling the majority of stakes in the media firms. These control groups have a stake in the status quo and they try to maintain it by establishing the general aims of the company and choosing its top management" (Herman and Chomsky, pp. 1-28).

According to the propaganda model, the government controls the media, although the media are officially independent. Formally, the government has the sole authority to grant media various licenses and franchises. Informally, the government also exerts control over the media by supplying news. The journalists are likely to use the government news as it is more cost efficient and less risky than expressing their own journalistic opinion. If the journalists talk on their own behalf, they can be sued (Herman and Chomsky, pp.1-28).<sup>3</sup> Also, the journalists use information supplied by the government because it seems credible and authoritative. In this respect, the propaganda model is closest to indexing theory but indexing

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<sup>3</sup> The interesting part of the propaganda model is that censorship of the government exists but it serves mainly to mask the fact that the media are subservient to the government. Critics of the government appear to chase from the news headlines other more grievous criticism. They also exist to solidify the public's illusion that the system is free. The maintenance of the propaganda model is aided by the fact that many journalists themselves do not realize that their freedom is constrained.

theory is different as it also allows the journalists to be guided by noble as opposed to purely materialistic motivations behind serving the interests of the politicians. Also, indexing theory argues that journalists are consistently subservient to the government only, whereas political parallelism argues that journalists pick sides and stay with them, regardless who is in power.

There is another catch in the propaganda model. The government supposedly buys out the allegiances of think tanks and intellectuals by co-opting them in the establishment. As a result of these very informal influences of the government on the media, the government creates the illusion of media freedom, when the media are not free. In this aspect, indexing theory and the propaganda model are also similar. They both purport that the government criticizes itself thus shooting two birds with one stone- it chooses the most convenient topics of criticism for which it has the best defense; it avoids some really thorny issues, whilst creating the illusion of a working democratic self-correcting mechanism.

About a decade after the propaganda model appeared, Hallin and Mancini introduced a categorization of media systems that built upon the notions of professionalization developed by the Fourth Estate and social responsibility theory, and on commercialization and state intervention, developed by the propaganda model. But Hallin and Mancini also introduced a new dimension, which was glaringly missing from these models- the political aspect. Under the banner of political parallelism, or press party parallelism, Hallin and Mancini argued that it is important to see to what extent the media reflect the view of political parties. Political parallelism may take many forms. The most obvious is organizational connections between the media and political parties. But political parallelism can also be more subtle, such as a tendency for the career path of journalists to be shaped by their political affiliations, and by the partisanship of media audiences. In short, the media are a tool in the hands of political parties- hence the idea of instrumentalization.

From the brief overview of the theories above, it is clear that indexing theory walks a very fine line between the idealistic version of journalistic autonomy advanced by the Fourth estate ideal and social responsibility theory and the somewhat grass materialistic account of journalistic motivation purported by the propaganda and party press models.<sup>4</sup> What is clear is that all five theories and concepts offer varying rationales why different players will venture to criticize the government.

### **Introducing the Symbolic Power Model**

The above five models- indexing theory, the Fourth Estate concept and social responsibility theory, propaganda model and political parallelism, do not solve completely the question who raises criticism against the government in the media. They give us very different accounts of the sources of government

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4 Following the Zeitgeist line of argument, indexing theory equals the journalistic motivation to that of the Fourth estate ideal and social responsibility theory. But if we follow the rational motivation part of the argument, the indexing theory is more similar to the propaganda and party press models.

criticism. Indexing theory talks about the relative slim role of the opposition in forming the news stream, but it does not single out the role of the opposition in the critical part of the news stream. The other four theories do not weigh the *relative* share of authorship of public criticism of the government. Thus it is not clear whether professionalization, commercialization and politicization are directly opposed, positively related, or completely independent. No systematic study has been done to establish the comparative share of authorship of public critic of the government. Admittedly, Hallin and Mancini touch upon the interplay between professionalization and instrumentalization. But their claim is totally theoretical and is not backed up by empirical data.

The second shortcoming of these models is that they give us very little prediction about the role of media critics in new and less developed democracies. Each model is premised on particular events, which are specific for the Western European countries, such as the First Amendment, the abolition of stamp taxes and the creation of the Federal Communications Commission. Indexing theory is entirely dependent on the Washington consensus and the press machine of the White house. And if the underlying processes and structures differed, then it is unclear whether we should expect the same critics to be active in the in Eastern European Countries as in the West.

The third and, in my mind, most substantial shortcoming of the theories is that they pay very little attention to the political opposition as a public critic of the government. Indexing theory seems to underplay the importance of the opposition in Congress. Admittedly, Hallin and Mancini touch upon the importance of political parties but only in the sense that each media outlet is loyal to one or two political parties. They do not talk about the place of the political opposition in the mainstream media. The other three theories completely ignore the opposition. This general omission is rather bewildering as the opposition, at least theoretically, has every reason to try to discredit the government.

The first reason why the political opposition should try to get involved in mud sliding is that political power is a competitive, zero sum game. The second reason is that the media provide a platform to challenge, enhance or annihilate the symbolic power. The third reason is that symbolic power is crucial in politics. The view that media allegations can have an effect on symbolic power and, consequently, on political power is best expressed by Thompson (2000: 103). More specifically, Thompson ties the notion of media allegations to scandal:

Scandal (or the threat of scandal) has such significance in the political field because it can destroy (or threaten to destroy) a vital source upon which the power of political representatives depends—namely, their reputation and good name, and the respect accorded to them by other politicians and the public at large. To destroy or damage their reputation is to destroy or damage their credibility,

and thereby to weaken or undermine their capacity to persuade or influence the others, to secure a bond of trust and to turn their words into deeds.

Verbal criticism is very powerful because people assess the government not only on the basis of its actual performance, but also on the basis of its public image. The link between actual political power and symbolic representation is strong. According to Bourdieu (1999), symbolic capital, which includes such notions as prestige, honor and the right to be listened to, is a crucial source of power. Kane (2001:2) applies Bourdieu's idea of symbolic capital to politics. He argues that "reputation inevitably represents a resource for political agents, one that... enables political processes, supports political contestants, and creates political opportunities."

The paper advances the symbolic power model. Its main premise is that various groups, which so far have been limited to the institutional means to gain power, now resort to the public arena. *Their main goal is to gain symbolic power.* Their main means to earn political credit is to accuse the government publicly. The symbolic power model has five main components:

1. Political power is contestable and is dependent on symbolic power.
2. Various entities increasingly seek to augment their symbolic capital.
3. Symbolic capital can be increased by discrediting the power holders.
4. The power holders can be discredited by making media accusations against them.
5. The role of the media is to mediate the access to public criticism making.

The symbolic power model is closest to the political pressure model and to indexing theory because it views the media as the ultimate instrument to gain political power. Unlike indexing theory, however, it is specifically focused on the connection between the opposition and the media, not between the all governing forces and the media. Unlike the political pressure model, it attributes a high degree of power to the political opposition across all media, not just to the media outlets owned by the opposition. The symbolic power model is similar to the propaganda model in the sense that it admits of collaboration between the state and the businesses in controlling the media agenda. But it is different in the sense that it allows all players, not just the oligarchs and the state, to try to instrumentalize the media. The symbolic power model is most different from the social responsibility theory and the Fourth Estate ideal. It does not believe that the media initiate important criticisms at the government. Instead, the media are primarily an arena where the various actors jostle for political power. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Two caveats are in order. First, the making of public criticism can be construed as whistleblowing. Some authors view whistleblowing as the use of reporters by "those with groundless claims, those who are vengeful, and those with other ignoble motives" (Callahan and Dworkin 1994: 151). Bok, in his book *Whistleblowing and Professional Responsibility*, argues that "the disappointed, the incompetent, the malicious and the paranoid all too often leap to accusations in public" (Bok 1980 cited in Callahan, et al). This article operates on the premise that criticizing the government in public is conducive to the democratic process. The second, and more important consideration, is that we will never know whose interests the media actually serve. All we, as outside observers, can tell for sure is whose interests the journalists chose to show they serve. There might be some correlation between whose interests the journalists serve and whose interests they acknowledge publicly that they serve. For example, Watergate, the jewel in the crown of investigative journalism, was long believed to be the



### Methodological Considerations: Data Collection and Selection of Countries

The selection of countries controls for two conditions- the degree of media freedom and level of democratic consolidation. These two categories seem the most obvious choices when one wants to test how theories that grew out of historical and political developments in the West, such as the Enlightenment and industrialization, fair in different circumstances.

The selected countries, Bulgaria, Germany and Russia, represent three different levels of media freedom and democratic development. Germany grants most freedom to the media, whilst Russia is the opposite, with Bulgaria occupying a middle position. In terms of democratic development, the selection represents the gamut of an established, an authoritarian, and a transitional country (see table 2).

Table 2: Criteria for Selecting the Country Case Studies

Country	Media Freedom	Democratic Development
Germany	High: 1.50 (2002) 4.00 (2005)	Established: Political Rights: 1 Civil Rights: 2 (2002) Political Rights: 1 Civil Rights: 1 (2005)
Bulgaria	Medium: 9.75 (2002) 10.25 (2005)	Transitional: Political Rights: 1 Civil Rights: 3 (2002) Political Rights: 1 Civil Rights: 2 (2005)
Russia	Low: 48.00 (2002) 48.67 (2005)	Authoritarian: Political Rights: 5 Civil Rights: 5 (2002) Political Rights: 6 Civil Rights: 5 (2005)

Sources: Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House

Media freedom is measured by the index prepared by *Reporters Without Borders*. The index ranges from 0 to 100, and is 'drawn up by asking journalists, researchers and legal experts to answer 50 questions about the whole range of press freedom violations' (Reporters Without Borders, 2002). The degree of democratic development is measured by *Freedom House*. The survey rates political rights and civil liberties separately on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the most free and 7 the least free (Freedom House Methodology, 2002).

I compiled an original database of more than 1, 634 media charges and 5, 980 articles involving the national governments of Russia, Bulgaria and Germany. I collected 2, 904 articles and 488 scandals in Germany, 2,583 articles and 942 accusations in Bulgaria, 493 articles and 204 accusations in Russia. It is no surprise that the absolute number of accusations in Russia is the lowest. The difference between the numbers of collected articles between countries is not decisive for the present research because we are interested in the *relative* portion of accusations leveled by various accusers *within the same country*.

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work of two talented journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. It was only recently discovered that they received a steady flow of information from the Federal Bureau of Investigation Associate Director Mark Felt. The point is that the actual media critics will almost never be completely known.

For each allegation, I noted down whether it is related to misconduct or incompetence, the position of the alleged minister, the title and date of each article related to the accusation, the name and the position of the accuser, the name and the position of the alleged minister, citations of any verbal response of the alleged minister, whether the minister was investigated and punished in conjunction with the accusations.

Coding was mostly open to interpretation. The coder had to interpret whether the article contained an accusation leveled at the government or not. Some of the content was manifest, such as the cases where the articles uses the words "accuse", "charge", "criticize", "blame", "reproach", "fault", "express concern with", "point the finger at", "is displeased with", etc. I also counted as accusations instances of formal indictment, threats for formal indictment and (threats for) parliamentary votes of no confidence, demonstrations, protests, all of which express implicit criticism.

However, accusation expresses an attitude and attitudes cannot be captured by a word count or actor count. As Bryman suggests, in such cases the process of coding becomes partly thematic, and a more interpretative approach must be taken. At this point, the analysis is searching not only for manifest but for latent content (Bryman, p.185). The table in appendix 1 shows examples of articles that were coded as critical, although they did not contain explicit words of criticism.

For Germany, I read the issues of *Die Welt* for the period between 1995 and 2005. The circulation of *Die Welt* is smaller than that of *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* but it was selected because it is owned and published by the Axel Springer Verlag, which also published the biggest selling *Bild* newspaper with a circulation of 3.7 million.<sup>6</sup> Thus *Die Welt* presents a sample of the most influential publishing group in the industry. The difference is that *Bild* is more celebrity oriented, whereas *Die Welt* is more politics oriented. As *Die Welt* is known to be politically right of centre, I double checked the information with the TV news emission *Die Tagesschau*, which is supposed to represent more politically neutral coverage.

For Bulgaria, I read the second biggest national daily *24 Hours* in the period from 1990 to 2005. *24 Hours* began as a private venture and is now a part of the German WAZ media group, which is said to have close connections to the German social democratic SPD party<sup>7</sup>. I double checked the information with the database of media accusations collected by the Center for the Study of Democracy (Media Monitoring Project, 2007).

For Russia, I read the daily press digests of *Radio Free Europe Liberty* for the period between 1995 and 2005. Radio Free Europe encompasses various TV, radio, newspapers, and websites at both the local and the national level. It also has its own sources. This method of sampling for Russia is different from the sampling for Bulgaria and Germany, which relied mainly on one newspaper. But it was necessary because

<sup>6</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3414139.stm>

<sup>7</sup> WAZ recently withdrew. Study of Vaclav Stetka at Oxford University.

none of the Russian dailies provided the minimum required number of accusations at the government to be statistically significant. I double checked some information in the newspaper *Izvestya*.

Contrary to existing studies, which include all articles related to a given problem, this study includes only articles which contain some criticism leveled at the government. Thus the main sampling criterion is not all informational coverage on a particular event, such as hurricane Katrina, Libya crisis, etc., but critical coverage only on all events for a period of ten years in three countries.<sup>8</sup>

The unit of analysis is not an article but an accusation. The position of the article and its length were not taken into account. The news in each country was sampled by a separate researcher. To ensure intercoder reliability, I distributed a detailed sheet of coding instructions, and also gave each coder a sample of 10 news stories to establish their coding scheme. Intercoder reliability averaged .95 on across three categories. It was .85 on determining the accusing tone of the article and 1.00 when determining discreet categories, such as the rank and name of the actors.

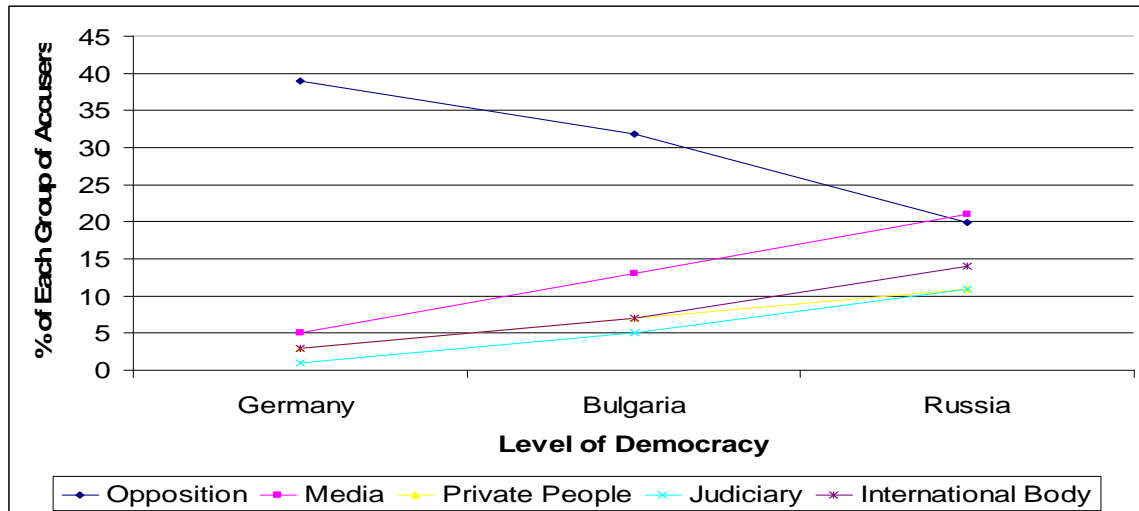
### **Sources of Media Criticism: Empirical Findings**

The most enlightening and novel discovery revealed by the empirical findings is that there is a very clear relationship between accusations made by the opposition, on the one hand, accusations made by international bodies, the media, judiciary and private people, on the other hand (graph 1). As the accusations by the opposition increase, the charges made by the journalists, representatives of international organizations, the prosecutor general and individual citizens diminish, and vice versa.

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<sup>8</sup> The database encompasses not only cases of big scandals but also everyday, regular criticism. The selection criteria do not control for the veracity of the allegations for three reasons: unsubstantiated criticisms have become a common practice (Sabato 1993:5); the public has no means or information to verify them; even unfounded stories can have an effect on public opinion. As the old sage goes, throw dirt enough, and some will stick.

Graph 1: Public Accusers of the Government



Source: Author 2008

The trend showing opposing activeness is well defined. The opposition is most active in the most democratic country in the sample – Germany, and is least active in the least democratic country in this study- Russia. Conversely, the media, individual citizens, the judiciary, and international organizations are least active in Germany and most active in Russia. Bulgaria occupies a middle opposition.

### Oppositional Critics: The Most Important Media Critic in Democracies

The empirical results suggest that there is a new player on the public criticism map- the political opposition. The opposition is the chief whistle blower and the main mechanism for expressing societal grievances. While the existing research on public criticism of the government may have been looking for the critical initiative in the journalists or private interests, it has neglected the importance of the political opposition. It is unclear what drives the causality between the opposing relationship between the activity of the opposition, on the one hand, and the media, private people, international bodies, on the other hand. Is it because the media are weak that the opposition is strong, or is it because the opposition is strong that the media are weak? But since not only the media, but several other types of critics appear to be related negatively to the share of oppositional criticism, it is reasonable to conjecture that it is indeed the opposition that drives the process of criticism making.

This discovery is in line with the symbolic capital theory. It highlights the line of argument advanced by John Thompson that media incriminations are an important weapon in the fight for public opinion: "Specifically in cases of political scandal, there may be some groups which are seeking to pursue scandal as a means of discrediting their opponents" (Thompson 2000: 77).

Again in line with the symbolic capital theory, it could be argued that of all possible critics of the government, the political opposition has the highest motivation to discredit the incumbents. Because politics is a zero sum game, the opposition could win symbolic credit by defaming the power-holders. The ultimate goal of the opposition is that this symbolic credit may turn into real political power at the next elections. Of course, for the opposition to be an active critic, the stakes of power must be not only high but obtainable. This means that elections must be fair and competitive. Public approval needs to matter. The government could potentially be toppled by a severe decrease in public approval, impeachment, or by legislative votes of no-confidence. The institutional design of the system also needs to be conducive to a fight for symbolic political capital. Thus, for example a consensus type of democracy is less susceptible to open and bitter battles for the public approval than a majoritarian system.

The opposition has not only better motivation but also better means to discredit the government than journalists. The reason is that the opposition has better access to potentially discrediting information about the government. Simply speaking, there is a division of labor in a country where politics is a profession, and the opposition's role is to watch for government's blunders. In its capacity as a parliamentary power, the opposition is paid to watch for instances of government misconduct and incompetence and is therefore more informed about them. But the opposition also has other, less formal channels to acquire incriminating information. The opposition can gather secrets behind the close doors in parliament. Alternatively, oppositional parties that have been previously in power can use the knowledge it had gained from access to documents, dossiers, and secret files collected by Secret Services.

Finally, the opposition has more advanced and less costly instruments for criticizing the government. Political parties have sophisticated PR machines at their disposal in comparison to international critics, individuals and NGOs. Another major factor enabling oppositional criticism in a democracy is that the media are ready and willing to report the opposition's claims, because they can make profits by reporting these accusations, they can avoid responsibility for making its own claims, and because oppositional claims are authoritative.

As graph one shows, the voice of the Russian opposition in the press is weak. This impotence is partly due to the fact that the opposition's parliamentary standing is not influential and partly due to the fact that the media do not report oppositional concerns about the government because the media are not completely free. Especially after Putin's first term in office and the 2003-2004 parliamentary and presidential elections, the

political opposition has almost lost its influence (Gel'man 2005: 226). Conversely, as the opposition in Germany is stronger in parliament, it also seeks to accuse the government in public. Another possible reason why the opposition seeks to make a point in public is that it realizes that important legislative battles cannot be won without public support. This trend shows that the legislature often only formalizes disputes that are fought in the public space.

A word of caution is in order. It could be very well the case that the media only use oppositional criticism to advance their own position. As Birkel argues, "the newspapers favorably give voice to speakers supporting their own positions, thus instrumentalizing opportune witnesses" (Berkel 2006). If this is the case, then a high share of oppositional criticism might actually demonstrate a high level of professionalization, not a high level of political instrumentalization.

Journalists may quote members of the political opposition to portray their criticism as more objective. For example Tuchman argues that "the newspapermen believe they may mitigate such continual pressures as deadlines, possible libel suits, and anticipated reprimands of superiors by being able to claim that their work is "objective." ...The newsman can suggest that he quoted other people instead of offering his own opinions. Tuchman's article suggests that "objectivity" may be seen as a strategic ritual protecting newspapermen from the risks of their trade" (Tuchman 1994: 151). Libel and defamation suits brought up by displeased incumbents can be expensive for a newspaper and such suits can easily be grounds for dismissing the journalist.

Alternatively, citing the opposition could be done to cut costs. Investigative journalism is expensive. As Schulz discovers, journalistic considerations of time and funding constrains are paramount in the reporters' decision to consult as few sources as possible (Schulz 1998: 147).

Herman and Chomsky evoke the consideration of cost in the decision to cite a source: "the heavy weight given to official sources is... a matter of cost: taking information from sources that may be presumed credible reduces investigative expense, whereas material from sources that are not prima facie credible, or that will elicit criticism and threats, require careful checking and costly research (Herman and Chomsky 1994: 19). Herman and Chomsky argue that journalists cite government, corporate and other official and business sources to cut costs. Obviously, the consideration of cost is in keeping with indexing theory. The current findings show that this point can equally easily be applied to the journalistic decision to cite the opposition.

### Media Critics: A New and Diminished Role in Democracies?

The findings demonstrate that the journalists are an important but not decisive media critic. Surprisingly, the media in the more democratic Germany are relatively less active in criticizing the government than in the less democratic Russia.<sup>9</sup> In terms of their propensity to undertake criticism in their own name, Bulgarian journalists are half-way between their Russian and German colleagues.

What is the significance of these findings? Do they indicate that the journalistic investigations have lost significance? Have the journalists surrendered their initiative and prying eye to the opposition and other societal actors? Are the Fourth Estate and social responsibility theories dead?

The findings indeed cast a shadow of doubt on theories which prescribe a high level of journalistic criticism for idealist purposes. They lend credence to the symbolic capital model of the media, where the role of the media is to mediate the access to public criticism making. The media is not engaged in making the criticisms in democracies.

The particularly interesting finding is that the highest share of media criticisms is in the least, not the most, democratic country in the sample set. This result demonstrates the application of the symbolic capital model to authoritarian countries.

Table 3: Application of the Symbolic Capital Model to Authoritarian Countries

Symbolic Power Model in Democracies	Symbolic Power Model in Authoritarian Countries
Political power is contestable and is dependent on symbolic power.	Political power is NOT contestable and is dependent on symbolic power.
Various entities increasingly seek to augment their symbolic capital.	Various entities do NOT seek to augment their symbolic capital.
Symbolic capital can be increased by discrediting the power holders.	Symbolic capital can NOT be increased by discrediting the power holders.
The power holders can be discredited by making media accusations against them.	The power holders can NOT be discredited by making media accusations against them.
The role of the media is to mediate the access to public criticism making.	The role of the media is NOT to mediate the access to public criticism making, but to cover the lack of inequality of access to the media.

<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that the Russian media make more allegations in terms of the absolute number articles but that the Russian media are more active vis-à-vis other sources of criticizing the Russian government than the German media vis-à-vis other sources for criticizing the German government.

The media in Russia seem to be an arena where the oligarchs and the state officials jostle for power. The catch is that in authoritarian regimes the media is supposed to conceal this connection by presenting the criticisms as their own. Thus the activity of the media seems to support the Fourth Estate ideal and the social responsibility theory when in fact it disproves it.

The first explanation for the relatively active role of the media in Russia is that the oligarchs, or financial magnates (Schroeder 1999: 957), publish discrediting stories so that they can put pressure on the state to change certain policies. As Richard Sakwa (2004:107) points out, under Yeltsin, "most of the press and much of the electronic media had fallen under the influence of the individual oligarchs, who then proceeded to use the media as a weapon in their struggle against each other and to influence the policies of the state." Sometimes, the connection between the oligarch's interests and their accusations is not so direct. In these cases, the goal is not to make the government reverse a specific policy but to throw mud at a minister and generally smear his reputation. For example, "Novye izvestiya" on 2 April 1998 accused the acting Prime Minister Kirienko of unethical and possibly illegal financial deals when Kirienko headed the Garantiya Bank and the Norsi-oil firm in Nizhnii Novgorod. The powerful oligarch Boris Berezovskii reportedly finances "Novye izvestiya" (RFE/RL April 6, 1998). The Russian Journal (1999) argues that Berezovskii had hoped to influence Kirienko "through the usual Kremlin<sup>10</sup> intrigues and manipulations" but that Kirienko "was not that loyal to the Kremlin "family" and its chief ideologist Berezovskii." Hence Kirienko and Berezovskii were in confrontation and the critical article may have aimed at threatening or destabilizing the prime minister.

The second explanation why the media are relatively more active in a less democratic environment is that the Kremlin criticizes government ministers in order to legitimate sanctions against them. The published story is rarely related to the real reason for dismissal or demotion. The allegation is the pretext but not the cause of government sanctions. Here, the logic and the timing of the public accountability process are reversed. Usually, first an incumbent is accused in the media. The popularity of the minister depreciates as a result of these accusations. Only then does the government dismiss the minister to preserve its social standing.

In the Russian case, the minister first falls out of favor with the Kremlin. Then he gets blamed in the media, so that the public can come to view the minister negatively. The point of this complex maneuver is that the Kremlin gets rid of disliked government figures and receives popular legitimacy while doing so. Discrediting a minister in the press appears to be a way for the government to receive legitimacy for illegitimate decisions.

Here is one instance when this type of logic may have been at play. In 1997, the tabloid "Sovershenno sekretno" published frames from a September 1995 videotape allegedly showing justice minister Kovalev

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<sup>10</sup> The Kremlin is a name for the Russian government.



with nude women at a club frequented by organized crime figures. "Sovershenno sekretno" reporter said she got the video from sources in the Interior Ministry. Ministry officials denied leaking the tape, but the Russian NTV channel suggested that the Interior Ministry may have retaliated after Kovalev publicly defended a businessman called Arkadii Angelevich, who was arrested in April 1997 on suspicion of stealing \$7 million. He had reportedly been a close associate of Kovalev. Not long after the video surfaced, Yeltsin suspended the justice minister (RFE/RL June 23, 1997). In this instance, the dismissal follows the publication of discriminating information only temporarily, not causally. The publication justified the dismissal in the public eye.

The third possibility is that government members plant criticisms in the press against themselves. This gives them an opportunity to take a certain course of action as a response to the criticism. The catch is that they fear initiating this action, but they feel that it is fine to do it in the form of a reaction to a public assault. They need this extra cover to justify their actions to other powerful figures who would otherwise disagree with them.

Dyck (2002) provides an example. The Russian securities regulator suggested a policy of stock dilution, where new stocks are issued, which in turn reduced the value of available stocks. Browder, who was the head of a large investment fund focused on investing in Russian equity securities, criticized this policy vehemently in the foreign press. The negative coverage caught the attention of Vasiliev, the head of the Russian securities regulator, and he reversed this policy. The important detail here is that according to Browder, Vasiliev wanted to receive criticism in the press so that he could justify the reversal of the policy as a form of response. This defensive move sheltered him from the wrath of the oligarchs. Browder recalls:

The reason he [Vasiliev] made this decision is that I was screaming bloody murder... I was shooting from the trenches, and this gave him cover to take his own steps. You have to remember that, as has become clearer since then, oligarchs owned the government and Vasiliev was worried about terrible things happening to him, professionally or even worse. By not initiating but responding to an attack, he felt more empowered to act. He asked us on a number of occasions to raise specific points in the press because he couldn't go on the offensive until something came out publicly. He was clear that he couldn't be seen as initiating but responding (Dyck 2002: 8).

The fourth explanation for the relatively active role of the media in Russia is that some journalists brave the hostile environment and criticize the government out of their personal conviction. These accusations involve high costs. Two outstanding examples are Anna Politovskaya and Paul Khlebnikov, who paid for their criticism with their lives.

To summarize, the complex structure of the Russian media leaves room for several explanations why media accusations represent such a high proportion of total accusations in Russia. Some of the allegations express

sincere dissatisfaction with government policies; others are just a way to legitimize authoritarian government decisions. But the most likely scenario suggests that media criticism appears as a veiled government intervention in political life, instead of a truly independent accountability mechanism. This finding suggests that high degree of media accusations is not compatible with the notions of professionalization advanced by the Fourth Estate and social responsibility theories.

The finding about Russia demonstrates the explanatory power of the symbolic power model as applied to authoritarian settings- when political power is not contestable, the media serve to conceal the authoritarian tendencies of the state and the oligarchy. This is somewhat similar to the connection between the media and authoritarian groups in the propaganda model. It is possible, it turns out, to have powerful economic interests and the state determine the agenda in semi-authoritarian settings as well. The difference is that in more democratic settings the media use government information to cut costs, whereas in authoritarian regimes, the media are coerced to report government information to save their business.

### **Conclusion: The Utility of the Symbolic Power Model**

The symbolic power model is meant to reflect two concomitant developments- the decrease of institutional effectiveness in gaining political power, and the increasing proclivity of groups that depend on public support to gain symbolic capital. The key to the symbolic power model is that the media are a forum of competition for symbolic power.

The symbolic power model is applicable to democratic countries because it assumes that political power is contestable but it can also function in authoritarian countries, where the oligarchs and the state have monopolized power. The model shows very well how different assumptions about the contestability of power yield very different predictions about the role of the media. A non-contestable model of politics turns the media into a channel for concealing governmental and oligarchic intervention. A contestable model of politics sees the media as a forum where the political opposition can gain symbolic power.

The symbolic power model is engaged in complex relations with existing models of press and politics relations. It is similar to indexing theory because it takes away the focus from the media as an independent critic and poses that the political establishment dictates the agenda. But it is different from indexing theory because it places a much higher premium on the opposition than on the government. The symbolic power model is very different from the Fourth Estate ideal and the social responsibility theory because it does not ascribe any significant agency to the media in raising concerns with the government. It is similar to the propaganda model because it allows for a group of wealthy individuals and the state to control access to media criticism. But it differs from it because it ascribes the main role in media criticism making to entities,

which rely on public support. The symbolic power model is similar to the party pressure model because it underscores the role of the political entities and views the media as an instrument in hands of political parties. The symbolic power model is different from the party pressure model because it places the key initiative with the opposition.

**Appendix 1: Articles coded as instances of criticism raised at the government on the basis of analysis of latent content.**

24 Hours	Die Welt	Radio Free Liberty
05/12/1995 Doctors seek the dismissal of Vitkova The Unions of private doctors seek the dismissal of health minister Mimi Vitkova.	1.11.2004 Entsetzen über Strucks Streichliste Through the closing of the various defense bases, the Union sees the weakening of the potential to react to danger of the troops.	17/ 05/ 2004 Prosecutor-general says his agency has taken on the functions of 'civil society' Prosecutor-General Vladimir Ustinov called on 15 May for criminal prosecution of government officials involved in corruption.
08/12/1995 The Cabinet is preparing bankruptcies for 50% of all private traders According to BSP, the Cabinet is not fulfilling its election promises.	12/11/2004 100 Korruptionsfälle in Ministerien The federal government has discovered over 100 cases of corruption in the last five years.	9/02/2004 Charges about Putin's closest friends ON 2 February, Rybkin declared that President Putin is "one of Russia's biggest oligarchs" and "has no right to power in Russia"
03/12/1995 Prodev accused Videnov and his advisers of suspicious connections The editor of "Duma" Prodev accuses the advisers of the prime minister in corrupt dealings with money of the newspaper.	21/12/2004 Bundesbank geht auf Konfrontationskurs zu Eichel ...with this decision, the keepers of the gold reserves go on a course of confrontation with the federal minister Hans Eichel.	18/08/2003 Former Kremlin insider says corruption continues to grow Georgii Satarov, a former adviser to President Boris Yeltsin who is now president of the INDEM research foundation, told TV-Tsentr on 13 August that corruption in government and society continues to grow.

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