

The Fourth Estate: Democracy's Equalizer

“I am not a crook,” proclaimed Richard Nixon in 1973. The then-president’s insinuations persuaded few; just a year earlier, Washington Post journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein had uncovered a plot to bug Democrat offices, hinting at a deeper source of corruption. The investigation slowly unfolded in what eventually became known as Watergate, resulting in the prosecution of four of Nixon’s top aides and the resignation of Richard Nixon¹. Although the revelation of this abuse of power at the highest levels of government disturbed many Americans, these acts would never have been made known without the media, illustrating the importance of its role as the Fourth Estate in preserving democracy.

As demonstrated by the Watergate affair, the press’s role as a watchdog promotes government transparency by exposing and hindering misuse of public office. A functioning democracy requires well-informed citizens to choose elected officials who will reflect their viewpoints on how society should function²; the onus lies on the press to inform citizens of the actions of elected officials, keeping them in check.

While Watergate remains one of the most prominent examples, the complexity of current affairs reaffirm the necessity of the Fourth Estate. Consider, for instance, the impact of the coverage of Roy Moore’s history of sexual harassment in changing the course of the Alabama Senate race, allowing the Democratic candidate to win for the first time since the 1990s³.

¹ “The Watergate Story.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/part3.html.

² “The Fourth Estate.” *Driving Democracy: Do Power-Sharing Institutions Work?*, by Pippa Norris, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 186–206.

³ “The 2018 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Investigative Reporting.” *The Pulitzer Prizes*, www.pulitzer.org/winners/staff-80.

Without the press, the government would have full reign over societal affairs and the people would be unable to discern when their elected officials had acted immorally or failed to live up to their duties.

Through the stories that it chooses to cover, the press effectively acts as an agenda-setter⁴, shedding light on issues of importance to the American people. The media plays a crucial role in highlighting the voices of those from marginalized communities, voices which would otherwise go unheard and overlooked in an age rife with social and economic inequities. The press's coverage of these topics prompts the government to act more responsively to the needs of its constituents while increasing public awareness of events beyond individuals' immediate sphere of exposure. In a society inundated with news feeds, the media's responsibility to choose substance over noise weighs more heavily than ever; it must not only cover issues that citizens *want* to view, but rather discern which issues are most relevant and pressing for society as a whole.

Although the media often goes overlooked in favor of more conspicuous agents of power, it fills the pivotal role of the Fourth Estate and acts as an intermediary to balance the scale of power between government and the people they serve. By informing citizens on critical societal issues such as gun violence or climate change, the media empowers them to take action to reverse these harmful trends. In working tirelessly to expose injustices and disseminate the public truth, the Fourth Estate provides a voice for all people in our democratic society.

⁴ "The Fourth Estate: Introduction." *Journalism in the Digital Age*,
cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs181/projects/2010-11/Journalism/index7f0d.html?page_id=16.

Works Cited

Norris, Pippa. "The Fourth Estate." *Driving Democracy: Do Power-Sharing Institutions Work?*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 186–206.

"The 2018 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Investigative Reporting." *The Pulitzer Prizes*, www.pulitzer.org/winners/staff-80.

"The Fourth Estate: Introduction." *Journalism in the Digital Age*, cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs181/projects/2010-11/Journalism/index7f0d.html?page_id=16.

"The Watergate Story." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/part3.html.