Discussions of the mass media frequently focus on the role of journalists. Critics complain that media coverage reflects the bias of liberal reporters; defenders maintain that reporters objectively describe reality. Underlying this apparent controversy, however, is an even more basic agreement: both sides assume that reporters aggressively pursue abuses of power and government corruption. Such analyses too often ignore the structural forces that limit the autonomy of reporters including the interests and intentions of their employers. Herman and Chomsky (1988) identified ownership control as one among several structural constraints in their ‘propaganda model’, and the increasing concentration of ownership Bagdikian (1992) documented may further restrict reporters and reduce the range of public debate. The importance of ownership is difficult to prove. Journalists insist that they act autonomously, and media institutions are not forthcoming about their internal processes, understandably, since the possibility that owners influence coverage would undermine their credibility. In a study of CBS News, NBC News, Newsweek, and Time Gans (1979) concluded that corporate executives rarely intervene, but he may underestimate corporate control. As Tompkins and Cheney (1985) argued, the mechanisms of management control may be barely visible; they may not even be recognized by employees, who internalize the values of the organization. But, they stressed, control is no less certain; it may be more effective because of its ‘invisibility’. As long as norms and rules are followed, the organization runs smoothly, and there is little evidence of conflict or interference.

The covert character of power is reflected in the internal record of the New York Times. The written record is sparse, offering little or no information on most issues and historical events. Even when controversies
occur, managers may be hesitant to express their views in writing. Indeed, internal communications at the *New York Times* are generally written cautiously, with numerous qualifications, as if to avoid the appearance of intervention. But evidence of management control can be found in the rare instances of conflict that help establish the boundaries of autonomy, and the subtle practices that encourage compliance without direct oversight. An investigation of internal *New York Times* documents, including the papers of one publisher and three top editors over 50 years, uncovers numerous mechanisms that owners and their editors use to shape the content of the newspaper.

### The publisher and the editorial page

Newspapers stress their commitment to independence, objectivity and professionalism. Owners are not supposed to interfere in the process. The official history of the *New York Times* promoted this image in its discussion of the publisher’s role on the editorial page. Adolph Ochs attended the daily editorial conference during his tenure as publisher, but he did not influence editorial decisions. Ochs merely listened, timidly expressed his own ideas, and then deferred to his employees. His ‘self-restraint’ was described as ‘remarkable’ (Berger, 1951). When examples of publisher intervention become known they are viewed as dramatic departures from the norm. But the internal record demonstrates that the publisher’s influence at the *Times* has been systematic, persistent and decisive.

The late publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger made this point clear, at least in private. When other newspaper executives inquired about his management policies he frankly affirmed his editorial control. He wrote to John Bassett, president of *The Gazette* of Montreal, that even the smallest hint of independence was illusory. He recalled that his predecessor as publisher Adolph Ochs used to hold editorial meetings with editorial writers, giving the appearance that an open, deliberative process existed. ‘He would go around the table, asking what each one planned to write about the following day.’ ‘Actually, of course, the assignment had already been made by the chief editor’, and ‘the major questions of editorial policy’ had already been decided. The formal mechanisms were largely irrelevant; it was in small, informal discussions between the publisher and his most trusted subordinates ‘that the course of the paper was really set’.1

The precedent was established when Sulzberger took over. For a time, Sulzberger read and approved of every editorial before it appeared.2 But once he appointed Charles Merz as editor of the editorial page it was no longer necessary to exercise constant oversight. Sulzberger found that he could rely on Merz. He and Merz were close personal friends; they sought ‘the same fundamental course’; and, most importantly, Merz fully accepted
Sulzberger’s ultimate authority. Sulzberger could issue orders with confidence that they would stand until amended. As Sulzberger explained,

\[ \ldots \text{there are a relatively small number of matters on which new positions have to be taken. Policy is like water flowing down a stream. At one place it may move more rapidly and at another less so, but it is always the same water.} \]

Only when new situations appeared was it necessary for the publisher to dictate the official line. And, as Sulzberger privately acknowledged, he ‘knew’ that Merz would not take a new position without explicit authorization. Thus Sulzberger could permit Merz to handle daily matters. Indeed, Merz’s apparent autonomy was a useful device: Sulzberger could pretend to leave editorial policy to his editors, while in reality ‘there was no question but that on The New York Times, the publisher was responsible for the editorial policy’.³

When Sulzberger handed the publisher’s job over to Orvil Dryfoos, he passed on existing policies of ownership control. He urged Dryfoos to maintain a ‘definite understanding’ with his new editor ‘that in the event of any disagreement on policy between the two of you, there must be no flamboyant resignation’. Ownership, Sulzberger stressed, ‘must have the final voice’. When political disagreements arise, the editor must accept his subordinate role: ‘it will be up to him to designate someone else to write the article and he merely edits the page but does not make any public statement as to the difference’. The last point was especially important; Sulzberger did not want ‘The New York Times changed into a New York Post’.⁴

Perhaps Sulzberger was merely exaggerating to his friends in private. Shepard asserted that when disagreements occurred the editor rejected the publisher’s suggestions ‘bluntly’ (1996: 108–9). But Shepard ignored other exchanges in which the editor responded deferentially, and even articulated the lines of authority and subordination. ‘I was a little upset about the lead editorial this morning,’ Sulzberger complained on one occasion, ‘not because I don’t agree with it, but because I think the issue is so important I would like to have been told about it before publication.’ Sulzberger’s note was instructive: Merz’s editorial conformed to the party line, but that was not enough; Merz had to confer before publication on anything important. Merz’s apology was equally revealing: as he explained, the editorial ‘seemed to me to take no position that we had not previously taken. As you know, I always consult you when we take a new position on a big issue.’ Such limitations did not leave editors much room for autonomy.

Sulzberger did not need to issue daily instructions, but he often did in any case. He delivered numerous demands and offered frequent criticisms to his editors, especially when he felt the newspaper was not sufficiently aggressive in its condemnation of Sulzberger’s enemies. These interventions provide a unique glimpse into his biases, the intensity of his feelings and
the extremism of his editorial suggestions. It was left to editors to explain why caution was sometimes necessary.

Sulzberger often seemed impatient with democracy itself. One example was his hostility to unions. Sulzberger’s attitude reflected the class consciousness of an owner of a large corporation facing difficult relations with organized workers. When he wondered ‘Why do we always have to hear the name of Harry Bridges?’ his tone suggested real frustration with his inability to rid himself of his own troublesome unions. ‘He’s been ordered deported, he’s been found (as I recall it) to be a Communist, and yet he remains the head of this important union. I know The Times can’t remove him but we could speak up.’ Sulzberger repeatedly directed his editor to attack unions and to urge stiff penalties. He instructed Merz to...

... go back to that attack on the Longshoremen. And can’t we run the risk of a little contempt of court by asking the Court to assert itself? After all, there are ways in this country of enforcing the law; and a very handsome fine slapped down right now for each day that the injunction is violated would, it seems to me, bring prompt action.

He expressed his hope that ‘we’ll hit these striking motormen hard. Their defiance of the injunction seems to me to be anarchy unless it’s followed up by punishment.’ Sulzberger was angry when the newspaper missed opportunities to attack unions, for example when the Times failed to condemn wildcat strikes in the automobile industry. In this instance, editorial page staff member R.L. Duffus defended the absence of a hostile editorial on the grounds that if it had been written it would have been out of date by the time it appeared because the strike was already over. Sulzberger accepted Duffus’s response. ‘Yes it’s dead now,’ he conceded. But he still thought an attack was in order. ‘As I see it we’ve had nothing on the page dealing with the irresponsibility of the union rank and file.’ Sulzberger’s sense of vulnerability expressed itself in paranoia over imagined union power. ‘I wish you would have some research done on the degree to which the electrical workers could tie up the country if they wish to do so’, Sulzberger requested. He estimated ‘that they could do it up to 100%’. Even worse, ‘let’s consider the fact that it is a Communist dominated union and see where we’d be in the event of trouble’. The publisher stressed that this was a high priority. ‘I think it is a subject that well requires study and a lot of comment.’

Sulzberger was obsessed with the Soviet Union. He stressed in his notes that constant hostile references should be made to it. He noted the politically correct terms to use, and he urged that they be repeated as often as possible. One ‘excellent piece’ referred to the Soviet Union as ‘the greatest “colonial” power of the day’. Sulzberger was especially pleased. ‘Can’t we go back to that and rub it in frequently? It would make me cheer every time I read it.’ As 1955 ended Sulzberger greeted the new year...
with the wish that ‘we’ll lose no opportunity in 1956 to continue to refer to Russia as a colonial power’. Sulzberger also liked the term ‘Iron Curtain’. When an editorial failed to mention it, Sulzberger expressed dissatisfaction and reminded his employees that ‘we ought never to lose an opportunity of making reference to it.’ The publisher perpetually pressed for harsher criticism. At one point Sulzberger proposed a long attack on the Soviet Union as a ‘change of pace’. ‘Don’t you think it might be based on Russia and the manner in which she has violated all the promises that she has ever made?’ Sulzberger rejected any consideration of compromise. He insisted that ‘nothing can be trusted until the Iron Curtain is completely lifted’. ‘Let’s never forget it,’ he added. When Sulzberger detected the implication in another editorial that Soviet leaders could be included in negotiations, he reminded his editor of the official position. At most ‘we can listen to what they have to say’. He stressed that ‘we should at all times point that out’.

Editors rarely questioned the publisher’s characterizations of the Soviet Union. Only when Sulzberger demanded that the USA take ‘the risk necessary to halt the extension of this blackout of human rights’ did Duffus raise a timid challenge. While other members of the staff were comfortable with Sulzberger’s language, Duffus worried about the potential consequences if ‘the risk necessary’ included the resort to military force.

As a result of Sulzberger’s influence the New York Times editorial page painted a portrait of American benevolence and Soviet intransigence and acquisitiveness. The image was so exaggerated that it prompted J.A. Goodman of the Swanton Courier to ask Sulzberger: ‘Are we Americans angels with wings and are the Russians devils with horns? Are our deeds always virtuous and are those of the Russians always vicious?’ Reading the New York Times among other papers, he added, ‘I would think that we alone are clothed in virtue and goodness and humanity and the Russians are evil incarnate.’ Sulzberger was certain that Goodman’s accusation was false, but he did not have the evidence. He asked Merz to supply it. ‘You can put your hand on things so much quicker than I can’, he explained. He instructed Merz to locate some editorials and articles to disprove Goodman’s assertion. Merz did find two examples of the Times’s independence. He advised Sulzberger to mention that morning’s lead editorial in which ‘we criticized factions in Congress for maneuvering to erect barriers in favor of some of our special business interests, such as the wool interests, while professing to favor a broad extension of international trade’. Of course this was not a criticism of Truman administration policy; it was a criticism of Congress for its inadequate commitment to free trade and insufficient subservience to the administration. So Merz also pointed to a long editorial concerning US–Soviet relations. In it, the Times urged ‘scrupulous regard to all legitimate Russian interests’. Apparently the evidence satisfied Sulzberger, and this is precisely what he wrote to Goodman.
On inspection, Merz’s best example of independence actually demonstrated the opposite. The *New York Times* internalized and repeated every false accusation made by US government officials, and leveled every imaginable charge against the Soviet Union. It could not have been a more glaring illustration of Goodman’s point. The editorial began by noting that the 1947 Moscow Conference had ended in deadlock and failure. The reasons for this outcome ‘have now been written into history’. As always, America’s role was strictly benevolent. The USA demonstrated ‘its good faith’ and ‘its willingness to share the burdens’ with an ‘unprecedented offer’ to ‘safeguard the security of all’. Soviet intransigence was all that stood in the way of an amicable settlement. It was the Soviet Union that ‘repudiated’ wartime agreements concerning Germany and Austria and ‘sought to impose’ new terms ‘designed to pave the war for her domination of the Continent’. The Conference collapsed because of Russian insistence on a centralized Germany ‘ruled’ not only by political parties but also by labor unions, ‘which the Russian administration is putting under Communist control within the reach of its power’, and democratic and anti-Nazi organizations, which were by definition ‘Communist-front organizations created for the purpose of assuring political domination’. Russian demands for the preservation of such institutions in a unified Germany represented ‘nothing less than a program for the domination of Europe’. Continued US ‘appeasement’ meant the ‘surrender by the Western world to Russian supremacy in Europe’. But the threat extended far beyond Europe. Challenges to the existing order existed around the world; the Soviet Union, driven by ‘traditional imperialism’ and ‘fanatical communism’, was responsible for all of them. ‘The gains made by Russia in both territorial acquisitions and political and economic influences are already the greatest ever achieved by any empire as a result of any war’, the *Times* warned, although they had already been surpassed by the new economic and political influence of the USA. ‘Russian domination already embraces half of Europe and a large part of Asia.’ Still ‘Russia continues her program of expansion.’ Korea, which was to be liberated and given its independence, Russia alone ‘has kept divided and sought to bring under her control by even more obvious methods than attempted in Germany’. The USA, by contrast, had nothing to do with it. Greece and China faced Soviet-sponsored ‘fifth columns and civil wars’. The Soviet Union even rejected an American offer to share atomic secrets, under terms set by the USA, of course. The conclusion was obvious. Soviet actions ‘can only be interpreted as a purposeful obstruction of every effort at peace and reconstruction’. The *Times* insisted that the USA organize the West ‘to fill the vacuums inviting further Russian expansion’. This was crucial because ‘the balance of power in the world is now so delicately poised that the surrender of one more nation to Russian domination might easily start a continental landslide in her favor’. After this long tirade the *Times* did indeed mention ‘legitimate’ Soviet inter-
ests, but the reader was left to wonder what would constitute a legitimate interest. The distorted image and hysterical tone of this effort were typical of the Times editorial page and faithfully reflected the views of the publisher. More remarkable was the intellectual environment at the paper that allowed Arthur Hays Sulzberger and his editor to view it as an exceptional example of objectivity.

The publisher’s direct control of editorial policy at the Times is significant; the question remains, however, whether this affects other facets of the news operation. Before we discuss other mechanisms of management influence, we should note one important consideration that has not received adequate attention: reporters need to please their employers. At the New York Times reporters always know where their publisher stands on the important issues of the day.

The wall of separation

Commentary on the media usually stresses the distinction between the editorial page and the news pages. The publisher may participate in the operation of the editorial page, but the independence of news coverage is sacrosanct. The publisher of the New York Times has not confined his intervention to the editorial page. Firm conclusions are not yet possible, but preliminary evidence demonstrates that the owner has jumped over the ‘wall of separation’ between the editorial page and the news pages. When the publisher does intervene, moreover, it leaves a powerful impression and it teaches lessons that are not likely to be forgotten.

The publisher gets involved over great issues and small ones. On one occasion the publisher’s wife Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger complained that Catholics received too favorable coverage in her newspaper. As with all criticisms from members of the publisher’s family, no matter how trivial, this one was treated with great urgency. Managing editor Edwin L. James immediately adopted a defensive stance: he carefully outlined procedures in a letter to the publisher, Arthur Hays Sulzberger. James estimated that New York City was home to about equal numbers of Protestants and Catholics, so he concluded that both religions should receive ‘comparable representation’ in the paper. Different religious practices complicated efforts to provide equal treatment; more unique Protestant sermons led to a larger number of articles. But the Times compensated by giving equal prominence to both: ‘we try to alternate every week on the lead on the sermon page, giving it one week to the Catholics and one week to the Protestants’. The attention devoted to the issue may seem absurd, but the tone of James’s response was serious.

Publisher intervention invariably elicits a dramatic reaction from subordinates. In 1949 US Ambassador to Guatemala Richard C. Patterson, Jr,
informed the Sulzbergers of the ‘persecution’ of American business interests in Guatemala. He warned that there were ‘240 Communist papers in South America’; he wanted to eliminate ‘Communist control and finally give security to American capital’; he insisted that US firms could no longer tolerate ‘continuous double taxation’. Apart from these dangers, Patterson found Guatemala ‘one of the loveliest spots on earth’, and he invited the Sulzbergers to visit.24

Sulzberger asked James to investigate the story, and substantial resources were mobilized to pursue the matter. After speaking to government officials and executives with United Fruit and other US firms with interests in Guatemala, A.H. Raskin reported that there was ‘general agreement’ among his sources ‘that it is harder to do business with the present constitutional government in Guatemala than it was with the dictator Ubico’. Ambassador Patterson’s fear of communism was hard to justify. There was not yet an official Communist Party in Guatemala, and no Soviet diplomatic presence there. But Raskin did discover the source of the ambassador’s grievance. US firms did not have to pay taxes during previous dictatorships; the current democratic government, in contrast, insisted that US firms should be subject to taxation.25 Times editors believed that this was not the moment for the newspaper to promote the issue. They accepted the opinion of ‘officials in Washington that little directly could be done by going after Guatemala alone’, that it might not be ‘wise to put the spotlight on this one country when the same case probably could be made against other South American countries’, and, finally, that ‘the cases of some of the American companies, especially the Fruit Company, are none too good’.26

Arthur Hays Sulzberger did visit Guatemala. And despite the conclusions of the internal review, he made coverage of Guatemala a special priority, personally dispatching reporters to cover the story. His reporters invariably depicted United Fruit as a benign employer, unfairly persecuted by Communists involved in a Soviet-inspired effort to dominate the region. Later, when the USA was on the verge of a CIA invasion of Guatemala, Sulzberger removed his reporter there, Sydney Gruson, at the request of CIA director Allen Dulles. Salisbury (1983) portrayed this acquiescence to government pressure as unprecedented, and he asserts that it was done because Gruson was ‘too good a reporter’ and might expose American plans. But as Immerman (1982) pointed out, Gruson rarely strayed from official interpretations; he merely expressed the tactical concern that public US intimidation might intensify nationalist sentiment. The notion that Gruson was a threat to US policy illustrates the standard of conformity that government officials and publishers expected.

Publisher ‘suggestions’ have special force. A complaint or proposal from the publisher resonates throughout the institution and can establish new policies. Unsympathetic treatment of labor unions in the news pages, for instance, may reflect the attitudes of ownership. In fact, when Russell
Porter gave too much prominence to the views of workers, the publisher was irate. ‘I would appreciate it if you would let me know how Mr. Porter happened to write his story as he did this morning’, Sulzberger instructed James.27 Porter had written a story on the sale of a newspaper. After the first three paragraphs Porter included a response from the newspaper’s unions. He defended his story on the grounds that the views of union leaders were a significant part of the story. Management was not persuaded. Porter was informed that ‘Management’s judgement is against him’, a particularly stern warning in the circumspect language of internal communications at the Times. Porter’s editors acknowledged that labor’s perspective was a part of the story, ‘but it could better have come further down in it’.28 It is not likely that Porter made that mistake again. And it is not likely that other reporters repeated that error either.

A.M. Rosenthal and objectivity at the Times

Owners cannot oversee every facet of the news operation. Editors are carefully selected for the purpose. It is their responsibility to shape the content of news coverage on a daily basis.

At the New York Times management generally gets the coverage it wants quietly through gentle persuasion and polite ‘suggestions’. Reporters understand the message and promptly comply with the bosses’ wishes. At other times editors directly dictate the tone and direction of news coverage. For example, A.M. Rosenthal’s tenure as editor of the New York Times was marked by exceptional dogmatism, editorial intervention and intolerance. During the 1980s Rosenthal imposed a more hostile attitude toward the Socialist government in Greece, and he criticized reporters who did not meet his rigid standards. If reporters took ‘objectivity’ too seriously, he corrected them. Rosenthal attacked one effort as ‘curiously pallid’. He objected to its ‘almost mechanical balance’ which ‘obscured the real story’, and demanded an inquiry.29

Rosenthal’s view of Greek affairs was shaped by a former reporter and novelist Gage. Rosenthal referred to Gage as a ‘first-rate man’.30 and their correspondence reveals their relationship to be close. But this is not the whole story. Gage was understandably bitter over his mother’s execution during the Greek civil war, and his hatred for the Greek left festered over the years. To his credit, Gage (1983) honestly admitted as much in his novel about the civil war. For instance, Gage acknowledged that his motive for becoming a reporter, nurtured since childhood, was revenge, not exactly an example of the objective values the Times is supposed to promote. He wanted to make former guerrillas ‘suffer’. When he heard of one Communist’s death he was ‘angered’ that the Communist was allowed to die in bed; when he realized that another was ‘living comfort-
ably’ in Greece he quit his job as a journalist to write his novel. Gage freely admitted his desire to attack an ageing former guerrilla as he interviewed him; and he discussed at length his efforts to murder the Communist he blamed for his mother’s execution. No wonder Kevin Andrews (1984) called Gage’s novel ‘a hymn of hate’.

Gage arrived in Greece as a reporter after military rule was replaced by democratic institutions. Yet he appeared almost nostalgic for the past. He ‘found solace’ in the Communists’ fate under dictatorship, ‘outlawed’ and ‘imprisoned’. In contrast liberalization was a ‘shock’, a ‘rude awakening’, ‘shattering’ his belief in ‘divine retribution’. With liberalization Greek leftists in exile ‘came flooding back and began to propagate their own version of the war’. Even worse, Gage perceived that the heresy had become pervasive.

Gage’s account revealed a totalitarian hostility toward dissent. The mere existence of a rival interpretation to the government version was intolerable.

Gage’s fury ultimately undermined his credibility as a reporter. In his account of the civil war Gage offered as evidence his insights as an infant, and his observations asleep in his cradle. In other instances Gage simply fabricated the details. He invented conversations; he imposed thoughts and feelings on historical actors without any evidence. Reality and imagination were routinely and hopelessly confused as Gage recalled fantastic incidents. In one, Gage’s mother experienced her son’s struggle as he was drowning many miles away. ‘It is clear why Gage has chosen to write his story as a novel’, Ole L. Smith (1984) observed. ‘As a documented report, Eleni would not have made the sales now realized, and the gaps would have been too obvious to carry conviction, even with an uninformed reader.’

Nevertheless, Rosenthal remained comfortable with his source. Gage’s influence can be traced through a series of letters to Rosenthal. Their interaction followed a predictable pattern: first, Gage would mention a recent meeting or shower Rosenthal with compliments; ‘You’re still the best reporter on the New York Times’, Gage asserted on one occasion.31 Then he would get to the point of his letter: so far the Times had missed the important story in Greece; an hysterical account of increasing Communist and Soviet domination would follow. Within a few days, Rosenthal would inevitably demand that subordinates cover the story, using precisely the language that Gage had provided.

For example, Gage once pointed to ‘The worsening economy, the fanning of anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism, the rapidly increasing power of the slavishly pro-Moscow Greek Communist Party’ among other
major stories that had been missed. To ensure better performance in the future Gage offered to meet with a new reporter bound for Athens and ‘give him my thoughts on developments in Greece’. Rosenthal duly distributed this letter to subordinates.

On another occasion Gage was moved to send Rosenthal ‘a note to tell you how deeply impressed I was with your piece on Indira Gandhi in today’s paper’. ‘All the countless words in all the other articles combined’ did not measure up, Gage continued, to Rosenthal’s ‘penetrating and beautifully written piece’. Then Gage turned to the point of his letter; he wanted to ‘alert’ Rosenthal again to a story that had not received due attention and was so momentous that it ‘may explode and leave Americans considering why the press did not inform them about it’, namely, ‘the Finlandization of Greece’. ‘Nowhere in the world’, Gage continued in his usual overheated fashion, ‘has the Soviet Union extended its influence as quickly and as deeply in the last three years.’ The Communist Party ‘has penetrated all ministries and institutions in Greece to such an extent that it has horrified even the most liberal civil servants in the country’. And ‘Communists completely dominate all of Greek culture.’ Theater, films, literature and the press had already fallen under Communist control. Now the armed forces were threatened. Within a few days Rosenthal had expressed his concern. ‘We really could dig into this whole Greece story deeper as soon as Kamm gets back.’

Gage’s views were so extreme that no reporter met his standards of political correctness. He even accused Henry Kamm of socialist sympathies. In July 1985 Gage informed Rosenthal that Greek opposition leader Constantine Mitsotakis would be in New York soon and he urged Rosenthal to interview Mitsotakis ‘and get a different view of what’s happening in Greece’. This was particularly important because

Everything from Henry Kamm has been so pro-Papandreou that for the sake of balance alone it will be good to get the opposing side in the paper. Henry isn’t going to provide it from Athens, so the visit of Mitsotakis is a good opportunity to get it in New York.

Rosenthal promptly informed foreign news editor Warren Hoge of Mitsotakis’s imminent arrival, and in words closely echoing Gage’s argued that

I don’t think we really have given the Greek opposition to Papandreou as much attention as we should have. . . . There is a real division in Greece, and I don’t feel that we have done a terribly good job in reflecting this.

Rosenthal requested ‘a real interview’ with Mitsotakis during his visit.

Gage continued to attack Kamm for his ideological unreliability. He wrote to Rosenthal that ‘there is a very interesting news story developing that I have yet to see mentioned in the Times’. The deputy director of Russian military intelligence in Greece defected to the West and provided
‘shattering information’ about Soviet penetration of the Greek government and the Greek armed forces. Gage noted that ‘Kamm apparently has not filed anything on it’. He could only speculate as to the reasons why. ‘I don’t know if he’s busy on other stories or if he finds it hard to write anything that makes the present government look bad, but it’s too important a story to ignore.’ 37 Predictably, Rosenthal quickly repeated Gage’s story and issued instructions: ‘let’s get on this right away in Athens and Washington and wherever else’. 38

Rosenthal’s file on Greece reveals only one instance in which more level-headed subordinates sought to restrain his enthusiasm for Gage’s anti-Communist rantings. As usual, Gage warned Rosenthal of a ‘big story the paper will lose if you don’t take an interest in it’. Gage wrote that Times Athens stringer Paul Anastasi had uncovered ‘strong evidence’ that the Soviet Union had gained more influence in Greece than any western European country. ‘Most disturbing’, Gage argued, was the Soviet Union’s ‘manipulation’ of the Greek press, ‘which it manages to buy off or intimidate’. ‘I think the Times would come up with one of the most important foreign stories of the year’, Gage judged, ‘a case study of how the Soviet Union manipulates a Western country with money and disinformation.’ For Gage this story would redress a deplorable imbalance in media coverage. ‘We have published so much in this country on how the C.I.A. has manipulated foreign governments and the press’, while downplaying the efforts of the Soviet Union and the KGB. In this case ‘the evidence is there and I urge you not to ignore it’. 39 As usual, Rosenthal directed subordinates to pursue the matter, this time in a memorandum to Craig Whitney. ‘Here’s something we really ought to look into as soon as possible.’ 40 Whitney was not similarly impressed; he did try unenthusiastically to abide by Rosenthal’s demand and salvage the story, urging Anastasi to shorten it and limit its scope. But as he pointed out, Anastasi merely discovered a Greek organization that published a pro-Soviet newspaper and sought investments from an official and open Soviet institution, without success. As Whitney put it, Anastasi seemed to be ‘pursuing what looks like a blind alley’. 41 Whitney confided to Rosenthal that ‘I don’t think there’s 10% as much here as Anastasi thinks there is’, although he promised ‘we’ll get something in the paper if there’s anything at all’. Nevertheless Whitney’s conclusion was clear: Anastasi did not know how to concede ‘that he really hadn’t come up with very much’. 42

This instance is illuminating in that it indicates how extreme the Gage/Rosenthal perspective appeared even to Rosenthal’s colleagues, but it is unique only in that it documents an effort to limit Rosenthal’s aggressive intervention. Rosenthal’s commandments were not usually challenged, and a careful study of the news pages of the Times would demonstrate the consequences.
Editors and censorship

Sometimes reporters in the field assert a degree of autonomy, and editors are forced to resort to more dramatic measures, including censorship. During the Spanish civil war the New York Times had one correspondent with the Nationalist forces of General Franco and another with Republican forces. Herbert Matthews covered the war from the Republican side, but his efforts frequently displeased his editors. When Matthews reported substantial foreign support for Franco from Italy, editors in New York simply suppressed this aspect of the story. Times editors systematically removed references to Italian troops and replaced them with references to ‘insurgents’ or ‘rebels’, completely concealing the crucial issue of foreign intervention. Matthews’s defense of his own objectivity and his calls for journalistic integrity were remarkable and inspiring, but received little sympathy in New York. Matthews insisted that he could not accept statements under his signature that he knew were untrue. An editor implied that Matthews’s reports were not credible and responded that ‘we cannot print obvious propaganda for either side even under bylines’. The editor pointed out that Matthews was virtually alone in emphasizing the Italian role, and he pointed out that the only other source making the same point were the Moscow papers.

Matthews brought the matter to managing editor James. Along with a letter, Matthews enclosed a clipping of an article with notations showing where references to Italians had been removed. Matthews pleaded for support: ‘The question is solely that when an accredited correspondent says he saw something with his own eyes, you must believe him – or else discharge him.’ To Matthews ‘this whole thing involves a principle of the utmost importance’.

James did not share Matthews’s judgment about principles. As he told publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger, reports from the Nationalist side referred to other fighters, ‘Moors’ and ‘Spaniards’. In addition, ‘the Italian Embassy was protesting very loudly indeed that the tenor of our pieces made it look to the public as if it was an official Italian army, which, of course it wasn’t’. So in several stories the Times ‘went soft on the Italians’, as James put it. The Times simply ‘deferred from making it look as though it was an official Italian army’. James did not believe ‘that there was an important matter of principle involved’.

Conflict persisted. Matthews continued to complain that his eyewitness accounts were compromised by editorial decisions in New York. ‘The beauty of the assignment’, he wrote to James, ‘has always been the ability to get out to the front or wherever one wants to go, and get the news first hand.’ ‘This is what a special correspondent is for and that is the one thing that has set The Times above other newspapers in the foreign field.’ But once reporters were sent, Matthews reminded James, ‘either you trust your
correspondents or change them or don’t have any’. James, for his part, continued to pressure Matthews to conform to management’s view. James pointed to published criticism of Matthews’s coverage, and he asked Matthews to look at matters from the point of view of his editors. Finally, the managing editor, on his own or at the publisher’s instigation, hinted that Matthews should accept a different assignment. Matthews resisted the suggestion. As he wrote to Sulzberger, ‘Mr. James said you thought I might have enough of the war by this time, but I assure you it would break my heart if I got relieved before it ends.’

Over time Matthews appeared to tire of the bureaucratic struggle, and his tone became increasingly beleaguered and desperate. Continued intervention from New York infuriated him. ‘I have received a constant stream of complaints from New York since the war started’, Matthews wrote in May 1938. He emphasized that he would not apologize for his performance; he hinted that management should apologize instead. And he mocked James’s suggestion that management only wanted to be helpful. ‘If you really want to be helpful in New York’, Matthews argued, ‘you would give me credit for doing my best as honestly as I know how and save complaints for after the war is over.’ In a letter to the publisher Matthews repeated his past grievances and added a highly critical summary of the Times’s performance. He concluded that ‘The Times cannot claim, for the Spanish war, to have provided a history of such documentary value as the paper’s traditions would ordinarily call for.’

One degree left of center (I)

By far the most important mechanism of ownership control is the power to hire, promote and fire. The recruitment of ideologically compatible reporters can help assure that management’s views are reflected in the news pages. Just as importantly, this can be achieved without the appearance of management intervention. Management can maintain its image of open-mindedness and tolerance.

That the New York Times used its hiring practices in this way was illustrated by the case of Harrison Salisbury. In the late 1940s the Times did not have a correspondent in the Soviet Union, and could not obtain a visa for one from the Soviet government. C.L. Sulzberger, the publisher’s nephew and the Times’s chief foreign correspondent, urged managing editor James to hire Salisbury. Salisbury met with James, mentioned the Moscow position, and acquired a visa to go there as a correspondent. The opportunity to fill an important position was tempting, but the prospect of hiring Salisbury raised deep reservations at the Times. Will Lissner passed on some of these doubts to the managing editor. Lissner acknowledged that ‘Salisbury is not a Communist, not a Socialist, not a Russophile.’ He was
worse than a Communist. A Communist could be dismissed as a propagand-ist. Lissner predicted that Salisbury was ‘likely to cause trouble’. But because Salisbury had no apparent motivation, he was not so easily ignored.51

James provided an unusual glimpse into hiring practices at the Times in a letter to C.L. Sulzberger. He noted that there were objections to Salisbury, and he added that he would have consulted others more closely if he had expected that Salisbury would get a visa. James examined Salisbury’s work, spoke with him and judged that Salisbury ‘is about one degree left of center’. But he emphasized that this was an exceptional circumstance. ‘After all, if we want a correspondent in Russia we can’t have one there unless he is somebody to whom the Russians will give a visa.’52 We can imagine what might happen to reporters who were more than ‘one degree left of center’.

**One degree left of center (II)**

In the aftermath of the Second World War Britain and then the USA restored and preserved the traditional order in Greece and the government that represented it. The old order was challenged by a mass movement with its origins in the wartime resistance, and the conflict led to civil war. The New York Times correspondent in Athens during the Greek civil war, A.C. Sedgwick, uncritically adopted the position of the Greek government, ignored opposition voices and painted an inaccurate portrait of events in the pages of America’s newspaper of record. This is not only my view, but a view widely shared at the New York Times as well. Times management was persistently confronted with evidence of Sedgwick’s bias; editors and reporters repeatedly complained that Sedgwick was unprofessional, incompetent and thoroughly compromised by strong ideological commitments. Nevertheless he remained with the newspaper for many years, and his perseverance demonstrates the New York Times’s support for undistinguished reporters whose one recommendation is their devotion to ownership’s ideology.

Evidence of Sedgwick’s temperament emerged as soon as he arrived in Greece with British occupation troops in the waning days of the Second World War. On 26 October 1944 the cable desk informed managing editor James that Sedgwick ‘is grinding his axe too insistently’.53 In his dispatch that day, Sedgwick sought to rehabilitate the Greek right, tarnished by collaboration with Nazi occupiers, and defame the left, which had led the organized resistance to Nazi rule. Sedgwick erased that history when he misleadingly suggested that ‘no party may be said to have monopoly on patriotism’. Sedgwick’s story was loaded with editorial judgment. He warned that the left was flooding the market with their propaganda through their media outlets; another observer might have recognized this as legitimate
activity and an encouraging example of democratic renewal. Interestingly, Sedgwick acknowledged the widespread reach of the left’s resistance institutions, but he referred to them in sinister tones. The population regularly accepted the authority of the left’s political organization over that of the government. But Sedgwick assumed that the British-sponsored Greek government-in-exile was authoritative and the resistance insubordinate in its refusal to quietly submit to British authority. Finally, Sedgwick noted that the resistance attacked German occupation forces, and he blamed Nazi atrocities on the Greek resistance.54 James informed Sedgwick that his coverage had been criticized as one-sided, and let the matter drop.55

Top editors at the Times were not troubled by Sedgwick’s assumptions. Indeed, they generally shared them. Assistant managing editor Turner Catledge confessed that he returned from a visit with Sedgwick in Greece ‘not only as a Greek sympathizer, but as a Greek agitator’.56 When Sedgwick asserted that ‘most’ Greeks would prefer that the British remain in Greece and that Athenians were particularly disappointed by the cancellation of a planned demonstration of American air power since they had ‘looked forward to the heartening spectacle’,57 James was unconcerned. Theodore Bernstein, who later became foreign news editor and assistant managing editor, did raise objections. He challenged Sedgwick’s evaluation of Greek sentiment, noted that Sedgwick’s statements that Greeks preferred the British and viewed a show of American air power as a ‘heartening spectacle’ violated Times standards of objectivity, and he pointed out that Sedgwick’s assertions required attribution.58 Sedgwick frankly responded that he saw nothing wrong with his pro-British slant. He had been with British forces during the Second World War, and he did not ‘see why one shouldn’t be pro-British if one is reasonable about it’. Moreover, Sedgwick had been with the British during what he described as the ‘liberation’ of Greece by British troops, and he compared the Greek resistance unfavorably with the Nazis. The left was ‘exercising a tyranny the like of which I’d never seen, even in Germany’.59 Familiar with the notion that editors vigilantly search for any sign of bias from their reporters, one might imagine that an editor would view such an emotional and unapologetic outburst from a reporter with alarm. Instead, James defended Sedgwick’s interpretation. After all, the managing editor viewed the situation much as his reporter had. As he told Bernstein, most Greeks probably did prefer that the British remain in Greece. James reasoned as follows:

A majority of the Greeks voted for the king. It is quite likely that all who voted for the king would prefer to have the British troops remain. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that most Greeks would wish the British to remain.60

Bernstein responded to James by emphasizing the importance of objectivity. He pointed out that Sedgwick should not have made statements that he could not support with evidence in the story. ‘The basic point’,
moreover, was that Sedgwick had ‘acquired a reputation of being pro-
something-or-other. A correspondent’s usefulness is greatly impaired when
that happens. Therefore, he, above everyone else should be vigilant to see
that no personal view creeps into his copy.’ Sedgwick had not controlled
his biases, and this was by no means a unique instance. Bernstein ‘had
been listening to nightly complaints from the members of the London
bureau about the amount of editing that was necessary on Sedgwick’s copy
to make it sound objective.’ Bernstein’s inspiring call for objectivity
apparently had no effect on upper management at the Times.

James had protected Sedgwick for the moment. But criticisms of the
Athens correspondent continued. In April 1947 Raymond Daniell, who had
been London bureau chief for the Times, wrote a long and remarkable letter
to James. First Daniell apologized for even writing such an extraordinary
letter.

I have made it a point scrupulously to avoid even the appearance of meddling in
the affairs of the daily. A good deal of soul searching has preceded this letter,
which I would not be writing except that I feel it is my duty to The Times to do
so.

Then Daniell got to the point: Sedgwick was ‘so emotionally and socially
involved in the Greek situation that he is utterly incapable of serving as
 correspondant for a newspaper which means to give its readers an approxima-
tion of the truth’. ‘He is frankly more royalist than the king and more Greek
than the Greeks. He is more a volunteer propagandist for the present
government and the monarchy than he is a dispassionate correspondent.’
Moreover, Sedgwick’s bias was obvious to everyone, thus undermining the
Times’s credibility. Sedgwick ‘is indiscreet to the point where correspond-
ents for other newspapers, foreign diplomats and all but the most ardent
supporters of the present regime joke openly about it’. Sedgwick made no
effort to hide his views. Quite the contrary. ‘Sedgwick himself boasts that
as there is only one side to the story he never talks to the opposition nor
reports what they had to say if he can help it, because that only confuses
the issue.’ In sum, Sedgwick placed his loyalty to the Greek government
‘above his responsibility as a correspondent for a serious American news-
paper on which thousands of Americans rely for trustworthy information’.

By this point James was inclined to fire Sedgwick. He indicated to
publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger that Sedgwick was incompetent and
intransigent.

I must confess that judging by past experience I see very little to be served by
my talking to him again, and I would not be surprised if you feel the same way.
I am confident that nothing you or I say to him will convert him, and I stress
that even up to the point of firing him.

Important voices at the Times did not agree, however. C.L. Sulzberger
came to Sedgwick’s defense. In a letter to James, C.L. Sulzberger acknow-
ledged that ‘Sedgwick is far from being a perfect correspondent.’ But Sulzberger believed that Sedgwick had received ‘a raw deal’. He recommended that Sedgwick be let off with another warning.64 James was not persuaded. ‘Personally, I like Mr. Sedgwick, very much’, James responded, . . . but I still think he would have done much better had he shown willingness to depart from the position he took when he was last here, and which he has pretty consistently followed in his dispatches, that there are not two sides to the situation in Greece; there is only one side.55

The publisher sided with his nephew. Arthur Hays Sulzberger harbored no illusions about Sedgwick. He told Sedgwick directly that management had lost confidence in his objectivity, ‘that he had become a partisan to such an extent that we feel it was evident in his writing’. Sedgwick did not deny that partisanship had affected his coverage, but he insisted ‘that the side which he favored was the right side’.66

During the years that followed Sedgwick was increasingly seen as a joke by his editors. ‘Our efforts to conduct classes in journalism from time to time for the benefit of our correspondent in Athens continue’, foreign news editor Emanuel Freedman informed managing editor Turner Catledge on one occasion.67 ‘There is little I can say about Sedgwick’s weaknesses that you do not already know’, Freedman wrote to Catledge on another.

I told him bluntly when he was last in New York that I felt that we should be getting more reporting from him encompassing all types of stories, and he promised to reform. Well, he has not reformed; he is the same old Sedgwick.68

Still Sedgwick remained the New York Times correspondent in Athens for another 14 years! It is a safe bet that Sedgwick’s fate would have been different if he had been ‘one degree left of center’.

Conclusion

The potential of archival sources in media studies has barely been explored. At this point, examples of management control stand alongside areas of silence in the record. This may simply reflect the success of policies that encourage employees to respond to their employers’ wishes automatically. Certainly the publisher’s relationship with the editor of the editorial page and the careful use of hiring policy suggest that this is the case. The publisher can maintain the discreet presence that Gans observed, yet still retain considerable authority. The available evidence highlights the importance of ownership and reinforces the expectations of the propaganda model. The owner’s complaints and proposals can be surprisingly blunt. And bureaucratic power may not be tempered by professional standards that emphasize objectivity and autonomy, as several Times employees,
including Herbert Matthews, Theodore Bernstein and Raymond Daniell, discovered when they unsuccessfully sought to alter management decisions. Further research into the internal record will undoubtedly reveal many more instances of intervention, and will contribute to a more complete picture of management influence at the *New York Times*. Similar studies of other media institutions will indicate whether these practices are widespread. To the extent that they are, news coverage in the mass media will reflect the increasingly narrow values and interests of corporate owners.

**Notes**

The author would like to thank Charles St Vil and Mary McCaffery of the *New York Times* archives and Mattie L. Sink, Manuscripts Librarian, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

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Chomsky, Management control at the New York Times


Daniel Chomsky received his PhD in Political Science from Northwestern University.

Address: 246 W. Upsal Street, Apt. D201, Philadelphia, PA 19119, USA. [email: mykyta@ix.netcom.com]