

When Lap Dogs Become Attack Dogs

The relationship between an American president and the reporters who cover the White House is often an uncertain one. Still, the president-media relationship has predictable patterns, according to a UCLA-led team of researchers that has closely examined 48 years of press conferences—the first systematic look at a wide range of conditions that influence White House media relations.

In an attempt to explore long-held stereotypes about the media, UCLA sociologists Steven E. Clayman and John Heritage led a 16-member team that combed through transcripts of four randomly selected White House news conferences for every year from the beginning of Dwight Eisenhower's administration through Bill Clinton's presidency.

"As a society, we need to know how our watchdogs are discharging their responsibilities," Clayman said.

Using sophisticated linguistic techniques, the researchers examined reporters' questions for discernable variations across five dimensions of aggressiveness; they then scrutinized the context of the questions: At what point in the president's term was the press conference being held? What were his ratings in polls? How was the economy fairing? What about broader historical trends?

The researchers found that the biggest fissures in the relationship occur in a faltering economy. While neither changes in the Dow Jones index nor inflation affect the tone of press conferences, rising unemployment and interest rates packed a big wallop, with unemployment having the stronger effect.

"Nothing makes the watchdogs bark more readily than a downturn in economic conditions," said Clayman, professor of sociology and the lead author of the study.

A downturn in the business cycle leads to more aggressive questioning not only on domestic affairs but also on foreign affairs and military matters.

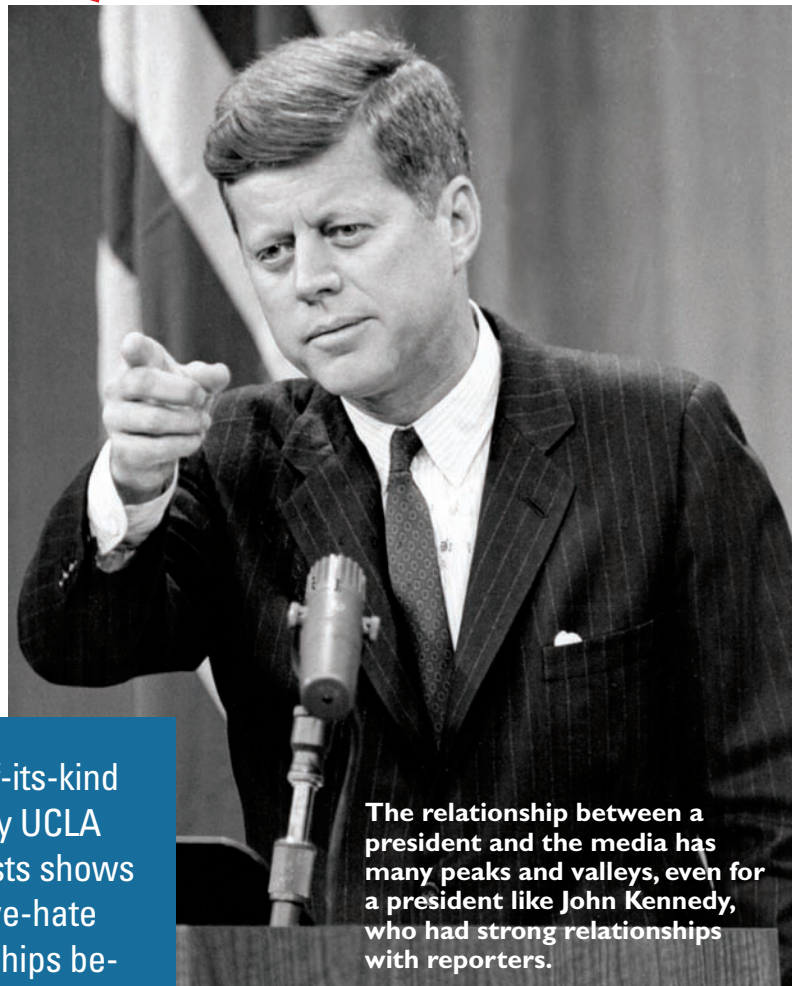
"Poor economic performance appears to contaminate a president's image in other areas," said Heritage, "leading journalists to become more aggressive."

Although the UCLA study disproved several myths, one common perception proved true: reporters proved to be half as likely to be aggressive on foreign issues as on domestic issues. Also true to stereotype, questioning became more heated during a president's second term. In fact, the press

corps was twice as likely to aggressively interrogate presidents during their second term as during the first one.

Even for all the signs of more aggressive questioning during second terms, the team, funded by the National Science Foundation, found no evidence of a period when the president could count on being spared—not even a "honeymoon period" in the early days of a new president's administration.

The study also found that although unpopular presidents are questioned somewhat



A first-of-its-kind study by UCLA sociologists shows that love-hate relationships between the president and the media can be analyzed and measured.

The relationship between a president and the media has many peaks and valleys, even for a president like John Kennedy, who had strong relationships with reporters.

more aggressively than popular presidents, "Journalists do not appear to be influenced by popular perceptions of presidential performance," Heritage said. "They are more attentive to the real state of the nation, growing more aggressive as economic conditions worsen."

Said Clayman, "We're trying to understand if journalists are aggressive at the appropriate moments. Now we can point to a systematic study that shows that, for the most part, they're getting aggressive at times when citizens would want them to be. At least in the domestic affairs arena, journalists are being reasonably good watchdogs." 