

**SEAN SPICER IS THE NEWS**

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEAN SPICER AND THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS CORPS**

**BY**

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## Abstract

This research concerns the relationship between former White House press secretary Sean Spicer and the White House press corps, analysed through the reportage of the daily White House press briefing. This relationship can be seen as a continuation of Trump's relationship with the news media during his candidacy. This thesis quantitatively measures the reportage by the White House press corps using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2002), and qualitative analysis of the reportage using journalism discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyers, 2001; Fairclough, 2010). These analyses are achieved by analysing three cases that became headlines due to the moment of contention between Spicer and the press corps. These case studies are:

- 1) The initial press briefing, when Spicer lectured the press corps for falsely reporting the size of Trump's inauguration's crowd.
- 2) Press Briefing #30, when Spicer forcefully instructed reporter April D. Ryan to 'stop shaking her head.'
- 3) Press Briefing #36, when Spicer controversially compared Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Nazi Party Leader Adolf Hitler and incorrectly claimed that Hitler did not use chemical weapons.

Online news articles about these case studies from 30 media outlets that have journalists in the White House press corps have been selected. The thesis then compares and contrasts the case studies' press briefing transcripts to the online news articles.

The theories that are used to perform this thesis' analyses are, disciplined bodies (Craig, 2016), habitus (Bourdieu, 2002; Craig, 2016), spin (Downes, 1998; McNair, 2000, Craig, 2013), political source relations (Downes, 1998, McNair, 2000, Davis, 2003, Sanders, 2009), news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2016), the mediated public sphere (McNair, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 2002, Jackson & Valentine, 2014).

This thesis finds that in political journalism there is a proliferation of articles that are more concerned about the political process as opposed to political policy. This finding is in line with the findings from The Pew Research Centre (2017), which found in the first 100 days of

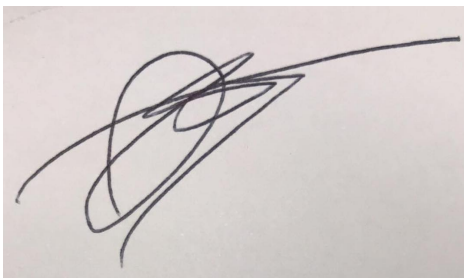
the Trump administration that news stories focused on Trump's and his staff's character and leadership as opposed to the administration's policies. This thesis asserts that this pattern is damaging to the American mediated public sphere, as it stifles the citizen's ability to learn about important policy matters that are affecting their everyday lives.

**Keywords:** The White House, press secretary, The White House press corps, news values, spin, political journalism, political source relations, mediated public sphere, Sean Spicer, Donald Trump, political performance, public relations, media relations.

## Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and my belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institutions of higher learning.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored background. The signature is stylized and cursive, starting with a large loop and ending with a long horizontal stroke.

Danielle Selman Julian

Dated: 3 July 2018

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## 1. Thesis background

This thesis seeks to analyse the relationship between President Trump's first press secretary, Sean Spicer and the White House press corps and how the relationship was manifested in the reportage. In an opinion piece published in *PR Week*, former press secretary to President Clinton, Mike McCurry (2009) asserted 'Press briefings are the raw ingredients of news stories, not "the news".' This thesis seeks to explain how Press secretary Sean Spicer and his briefings became the news.

The press briefing is the daily communicative encounter where the press secretary addresses the White House press corps in the James S. Brady press briefing room. The briefing has been televised since 1995 (McCurry, 2009), with exception of a period during Spicer's tenure when media cameras were banned from recording during the press briefings. The purpose of the briefing is to formally disseminate official White House responses to events and provide explanations on behalf of the President and their staff on policy issues (Kumar, 2001).

The presidential press secretary acts as surrogate to the President. The position has been in existence since 1929 when George Akerson first held the position of press secretary in the Hoover administration (Kumar, 2001; Walcott & Hult, 2008). It is the task of the press secretary to successfully manage a relationship with the President and a relationship with the White House press corps (Martinelli & Mucciarone, 2007). Towle (1997) states that to be successful, a press secretary must have a healthy working relationship with both. Martinelli and Mucciarone (2007) note that press secretary Stephen Early met with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor as much as he met with the press. It is believed that Early was one of the most successful in this position (Martinelli & Mucciarone, 2007). There is a lot of pressure on the press secretary to be a success in their position as former press secretary Mike McCurry asserted (as cited in Kumar, 2001) "a successful communication strategy is the only one aspect to a successful presidency."



Before President Trump took office, it was said that the White House press corps was the president's daily link to the public (Kumar, 2008). The press corps comprises of journalists from multiple media organisations that are assigned to cover the White House beat. These media organisations are newspapers, magazines, broadcast television networks, radio networks, cable news channels, and wire services. The White House press corps covers not only press briefings but other activities that happen at the White House. These other activities include presidential and joint press conferences, news releases and diplomatic activities (Sanders, 2009).

## 1.2 Research approach

This thesis seeks to answer an overarching question “How did Sean Spicer become the news subject rather than the news deliverer?”

The research sub-questions that this thesis will answer are:

- 1) How does Sean Spicer’s political performance in press briefings affect his relationship with the White House press corps and their reportage?
- 2) How do the media organisations’ ideological biases affect the reportage of Sean Spicer's political performance?
- 3) How do news values and conventions of political journalism influence the nature of the reportage about Sean Spicer and his press briefing?

This thesis will seek to answer these questions using a mixed methods approach to content analysis and journalism discourse analysis. These methods have been selected to produce data that is both quantitative and qualitative. The analyses of this thesis will be drawn from a content analysis sample from 30 media organisations that belong to the White House press corps. From these 30 media organisations, three articles were collected to represent the media outlets from across three case studies. For the discourse analysis sample, six of the most well-known and influential media organisations were chosen from the content analysis sample. A newspaper and a cable news station were each chosen to represent the liberal and conservative ideologies, as well as two non-biased newswire services.

The theories that will be used in this thesis' analysis include theories of political performance (Craig, 2016), Bourdieu's (2002) habitus and disciplined bodies, Galtung and Ruge's (1965) and Harcup and O'Neill's (2016) news values, the notion of spin (Downes, 1998; McNair, 2000; Craig, 2013), and the public sphere and the ideals of the first amendment (Habermas, 1989; McNair, 2000; Bennett & Entman, 2001; Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

### 1.3 Thesis Structure

This thesis contains eight chapters that seek to construct a narrative that answers the thesis' research questions. This introductory chapter has provided the research question and the background context of the issues concerning the research questions and introduce the methods and theories that this thesis will utilise for the analyses. This chapter will now outline the contents of the proceeding chapters.

The next chapter, chapter two, will be a literature review that shall review the existing literature surrounding this topic to contextualise the research question and the core concepts that will be used for the analyses. These concepts and the critical theorists are stated above. By scrutinising key literature, the analyses that proceed will be well-informed and justified.

Chapter three will then present the theoretical framework and research design of this thesis. First, the chapter will explain content analysis, and how the content analysis of this thesis will be 'problem-driven'. Krippendorff (2004, p. xvii) defines content analysis as "analysis of the manifestation and latent content of a body of communicated materials (as a book or a film) through classification, tabulation, evaluation of its key symbols and themes to ascertain its meaning about probable effect." The chapter will also explain how the researcher will attempt to combat sampling bias by ensuring the sampled media organisations lie around the political spectrum. Secondly, the third chapter will explain critical discourse analysis and why this particular type of discourse analysis has been selected. Wodak and Meyers (2001) concisely define critical discourse analysis as 'language

as social practice'. Discourse analyses are used in communications, international relations, anthropology, social work, linguistics, and biblical studies. Each academic area has unique sets of norms that accompany it (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). This thesis has taken inspiration from Fairclough's (2010) critical discourse analysis which has been influenced by Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. Thirdly, chapter three will outline the research design of this thesis, listing the media organisations that are represented in the content analysis sample and the critical discourse analyses, highlight the case studies that will be analysed and then explain steps that will be taken to complete the analyses. Following this, chapter four will provide tables and an explanation of the findings from the content analysis.

Chapter five will then analyse Spicer's political performance through the theories of disciplined bodies and habitus. According to Craig (2016, p. 75) "Successful communication does not derive necessarily from the demonstration of political truths but from the presentation of a habitus that fuses political authority with performative style: politicians must convey their knowledge and expertise as well as an appealing and engaging personality." This chapter will argue that this statement extends to politicians' surrogates such as Sean Spicer. The chapter will then explain how Spicer's poor practice of spin affected his political performance and credibility as press secretary on his first day and compares Spicer to President Nixon's press secretary, Robert Louis Ziegler. Finally, chapter four will discuss how political performance and spin informed on the reportage.

Building upon this, chapter six will then analyse how the ideologies of the media organisations affect their relationship with Sean Spicer and their reportage. Chapter Five will first establish the context of the relationship between Spicer and the press corps. Then, the chapter will seek to distinguish between political policy articles and political process articles, in doing this, the chapter will also analyse the press briefing transcripts to discuss the events of the press briefings that were not talked about in the case study articles, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline. The chapter will conduct a critical discourse analysis on the third party source quotes about Spicer's political performance to decipher their ideology and stance on Spicer. This analysis will be conducted across the three case studies upon the articles from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, *The Associated Press* and *Reuters*. Finally, the chapter will evaluate how the press corps affects the public

sphere, and how Herman and Chomsky's (2002) propaganda model could be applied to their reportage.

The seventh chapter concerns the conventions of political journalism and news values and how they impact on the relationship between Sean Spicer and the White House Press corps. According to Sanders (2009), political journalism is both a practice and an epistemology that has its foundations in 'the public's right to know'. The chapter will also evaluate the many roles that a political journalist takes on in their job and outlines the challenges that political journalists face (Kuhn & Neveu, 2002). Chapter six will then move onto explaining the original set of news values by Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Harcup and O'Neill's (2016) updated set. The chapter will then see Harcup and O'Neill's news values applied to the first three paragraphs and the first source quote from the discourse analysis articles. The critical discourse analysis will be performed across articles from the three aforementioned case studies.

Finally, chapter eight will conclude this thesis. The first section of the chapter will synthesise the thesis' findings and explain how the chapters work together to evaluate the relationship between Sean Spicer and the White House press corps, as well as how this relationship affects the political reporting of the press briefings. The chapter will then discuss the significance of the research, arguing that the press briefing is a fundamental communication tool to ensure an up-to-date, healthy mediated public sphere. The chapter will also hypothesise about how Donald Trump's 'running war' with the media could affect future press secretaries in future administrations. To conclude the thesis, chapter eight will then discuss the limitations of the research as well as suggest how the research could be furthered in the future.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter will address and evaluate key scholarship that has already been conducted around the theoretical areas of this thesis. First, the relationship between Donald Trump and the Media during the election campaign (Pickard, 2016; Francia, 2017), in an effort to supply this thesis with a historical grounding. Then, I will identify and analyse the White House Press Briefing, the daily event where the interactions that this thesis is analysing occurs. The White House Press Briefing is a formal event that is a unique function of the American Presidency (Craig, 2016; Kumar, 2003). Next, this literature review will explain the role of the United States Press Secretary, the person who is in charge of conducting the press briefing. The White House Press Secretary acts as a surrogate to the President of the United States and makes a statement to the White House press corps on the President's behalf regarding policy or world events, and then proceeds to take questions (Towle, 1997; Downes, 1998; Kumar, 2008). Thirdly, this literature review will explore the history and purpose of the White House Press Corp, as well as how a journalist becomes a member of this special class of reporters. Then, the literature review will explore political source/ journalist relations; in this context, the political source is the White House Press Secretary, Sean Spicer. Fifth, the literature review will examine the notion of spin in political communication. Following this, the literature review will explore the journalistic theories of news values, the Fourth Estate and the ideals of the United States First Amendment. Finally, this chapter will explore the theories behind political performance such as habitus and embodiment with the works of McNair (2000), Sanders (2009), and Craig (2016).

## 2.1 The Candidate Donald Trump's Relationship with the Media

Before Donald Trump entered himself as a candidate for the US President, he was best known as a hotelier and reality television show. Francia (2017) describes Trump's reality TV persona as 'fiery and bombastic'. Interestingly, Spicer was also referred to as 'fiery' and 'bombastic' by multiple media outlets across the political spectrum including *The New York Times* and *Fox News*. During his campaign, Trump verbally abused reporters at his campaign events, openly feuding with journalists and commentators who did not take his candidacy seriously (Pickard, 2016). After Trump announced his intentions to run for president in 2015, one commentator declared "Donald Trump isn't really running for president; he's running to make more money and enhance a brand that's bigger than his real-estate holdings and golf courses", another went as far to claim that Trump was simply "the guy nursing his sixth beer in the bar" (Francia, 2017). Trump treated any negative comments about himself and his campaign as 'fake news' rejecting their capacity to make truth claims. Furthermore, Trump chose to bypass journalists by communicating with the American public via social network Twitter, where he announced that when he became president he would change libel laws (Pickard, 2016).

Although Trump did not cooperate with journalists in the typical way of a candidate, Pickard (2016) claims that Trump received 327 minutes of nightly broadcast network news coverage. This is far greater than Hillary Rodham Clinton's 121 minutes of nightly broadcast network news coverage and makes Sander's 20 minutes seem like spare change. Trump also became a frequent figure on cable news media, the cable news media are rating-driven and Trump helped these organisations bring in \$2.5 Billion (Pickard, 2016; Francia, 2017). This significant amount of news coverage, helped Trump to stay in the public eye. Pickard (2016) believes that this 'breathless coverage' of Trump's campaign resulted in his fascistic politics that never warranted such legitimacy.

## 2.2 The White House Press Briefings

In American political communication, the daily presidential press briefing is a crucial component in setting the political journalism agenda. The press briefing and the White House press corps is considered the President's regular link to the public (Kumar, 2008). It is because of this reason that the press briefing is a crucial topic of understanding in this study when discussing the ramifications on the public sphere. Press briefings often take place in the James S. Brady briefing room, located in the West Wing of the White House (Schubert, 2012). Unlike press conferences which Craig (2016) asserts are newsworthy events in themselves due to the elite person presenting them, press briefings are not usually newsworthy in of themselves because the press secretary presents them, rather than the president. Kumar (2001, p.616) describes the press secretary being used 'aplenty' to communicate information. Former press secretary to President Clinton, Mike McCurry (2009) agrees with this sentiment, asserting in an opinion piece for PR Week "press briefings are the raw ingredients, they are not 'the news.'" According to Craig (2016, p.98), "the press secretary will meet with journalists and provide details of the president's schedule for the day and whom the president has seen, and they also speak for the administration on current newsworthy issues." Usually, these televised daily press briefings are in the afternoon (Kumar, 2003). Often in the morning, there will be a 'press gaggle'. These are informal gatherings where the press secretary relays the President's thoughts on overnight events (Kumar, 2001). Journalists sometimes conceal the identity of the press secretary as a source and refer to them as a White House official or a senior administration official.

Alan Partington (2003) states that in the press briefing the press secretary acts as a 'spin-doctor' who faces the 'wolf-pack' of the press corps. Schubert (2012) elaborates in this stating that journalists often work together by following-up on fellow press corps members' questions to clarify answers given by the press secretary and pressure the press secretary into answering questions they may be trying to avoid. The press briefing is considered a dialogical communicative encounter (Schubert, 2012; Craig, 2016). However, Sean Spicer's behaviour during the press briefing was an attempt to convert the press briefing into a monological communicative encounter.

In the press briefing, the press secretary takes on components of both the interviewer and the interviewee roles (Schubert, 2012). The press secretary is in charge of the proceedings.

They set the main agenda for the press briefing, like the interviewer. However, it is their task to answer questions set forth by the press corps. When it comes to question-time and follow-up questions, the press secretary loses some control over the press briefing. According to Schubert (2012, p. 454), it is during question time and the follow-up questions that the differences in discourse emerge. It is essential for the press secretary not to contradict themselves or the President during the press briefing. If they do so, they risk damaging their credibility.

### 2.3 The Role of the United States Press Secretary

Downes (1998, p.264) defines a press secretary's role as a 'gatekeeper'. This is because a press secretary must determine what information is shared with the media and what information is withheld, they have command over news shared with the public through the instruction of the President. Agenda subsidies literature suggests that it is the press secretary/ 'information subsidisers' job to successfully subsidise the media with information on policies and the politician's daily schedules, so there is content to be printed or broadcasted (Downes, 1998, p. 266). Downes' article investigates how the role of the press secretary aligns with J. E. Grunig's Excellence Study. Whether the press secretary is a part of the dominant coalition (present when decisions are made), Towle's (1997) article suggests that this is dependent on the relationship between Press Secretary and the President and will be discussed in depth later in this chapter.

In the opening of his article, Towle (1997) remarks that after President Eisenhower suffered from a heart attack, Press Secretary James C. Hagerty handled the press briefing in such an able manner that *Newsweek* conducted a profile on the press secretary. In 1957, this was out of the ordinary, the role of the press secretary has long been thought of as obscure, and President Kennedy's Press Secretary Pierre Salinger even claimed that 'press secretaries were not important people' (Towle, 1997, p. 301). There was relatively little academic research before Towle's (1997) about the press secretary role. This could be because there is not one standard to measure the success of a press secretary, due to the fact that presidents and the press may have different ideas of how a press secretary conduct



themselves. Towle (1997) believes that a measure of success could be how a press secretary balances these two sets of expectations, despite some mutually exclusive possibilities. This study (Towle, 1997) evaluates the nine press secretaries' performances that served in the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations. The press office became institutionalised in the Eisenhower Administration.

Towle (1997) identifies four factors that impact whether a presidential press secretary is successful in their performance. Firstly, is the press secretary seen as an essential aide, who is respected by the President. Is the Press Secretary an 'insider' or an 'outsider'? Hagerty was an insider, he was one of the people to have a direct telephone line to the President and spent time at the White House socially. Towle (1997) states that reporters are in tune with the status of the press secretary. Towle (1997, p. 298) quotes a long-time White House correspondent in saying:

Faster than Einstein's light waves is the White House press corps when it comes to knowing how a press secretary stands with a president. The reporters can sense the nature of the relationship immediately, and it governs their dealings with the man on the podium.

To assess the success of a press secretary one must ask if the presidents value their counsel on not just communication matters but also policy. The second factor is how the president allows the press secretary to disseminate information. Presidents may be strict on what a press secretary can divulge; others may allow the press secretary to elaborate and interpret the president's thoughts. A press secretary that does not have the freedom to elaborate can be referred to as a 'mouthpiece' whereas one that has elaborative freedom can be referred to as a 'representative'. Hagerty acted as a representative to President Eisenhower, and the press were forced to rely on Hagerty as Eisenhower only gave a press conference every few weeks (Towle, 1997). The representative style of press secretary gives reporters more insights to work into their articles. However, there is a higher chance that the president may be misrepresented. The third factor is does the president respect the press secretary or does the president's actions suggest that the Press Secretary does not have the administration's confidence completely. James Hagerty had Eisenhower's full confidence, according to Towle (1997, p. 299) when Eisenhower suffered his heart attack he instructed an aide to "Tell Jim (Hagerty) to take over." Moreover, transcripts of Eisenhower's press

conferences repeatedly have phrases such as 'Mr Hagerty confers with the President' (Towle, 1997). Lastly, the degree of respect that Press Secretaries command from the press is an important sign of success. These last two factors are connected, and Towle (1997) suggests that the press respected Hagerty because of the respect the President had for him. The press affectionately called him 'Iron Man Hagerty' and is reportedly the standard that press judges a press secretary.

There is a historical model of failure in the Press Secretary performance of George Reedy, Towle (1997) to Reedy as a mouthpiece for a close-lipped administration. Reedy served as Press Secretary to Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson was hesitant and distrusting towards the press, preferring to announce significant news developments himself. The press was irritated by the lack of information they could gain from Reedy and believed that Johnson was too domineering over him. Reedy was an outsider in the Johnson administration, and he claimed he was 'cut out' when he told Johnson that Vietnam would be a disaster (Towle, 1997, p. 304). Johnson's feelings towards Reedy were seen to be obvious and meant that the press did not have to respect Reedy. Towle (1997) noted that Reedy was a 'No Comment' press secretary and that his job was to be a dartboard for angry and irritable press corps. It could be said that Spicer's press secretary performance could be comparable to Reedy's.

Towle (1997) also provides fascinating insights into other press secretaries, such as Nixon's press secretary, Robert Ziegler, whose reputation for obfuscation resulted in the White House press corps coining the verb "to ziegler" which means to give an answer to the question without actually having to answer the question. Ziegler was the press secretary during the Watergate Scandal. After months of denying White House involvement in the Watergate scandal, Ziegler described his previous statements as "inoperative" on April 17, 1973. This destroyed his relationship with the press corps and the Deputy Press Secretary Gerald Warren had to be responsible for briefing duties. Despite this, Ziegler was the only remaining pre-Watergate member to stay on Nixon's staff and was promoted to be responsible for all communications activities over the executive branch. Although past press secretaries have had news articles criticising their performance (Towle, 1997), Spicer is the first press secretary to become regularly featured in the headline of the mainstream media.

## 2.4 What is the White House Press Corps

The White House Press Corps is a group of journalists from various media organisations that are assigned to the structured White House beat. This beat was founded in 1896, with three reporters William W. Price, Richard Hazard and Charles Richardson of the *Washington Evening Star* and the *New York Herald* respectively. These three established an office in the White House's East Wing and reported on morsels of information handed to them by White House staff. The White House press corps cover events that happen in the White House such as briefings, press conferences, news releases and diplomatic activities (Sanders, 2009). The growth of the White House press corps reflects the change in communications technologies. Over time, wire services, radio networks, television stations and cable news organisations have been included in the press corp. Despite the threat of newsroom convergence and the disappearance of the evening newspaper, the White House beat is still regarded as a critical part of the news hierarchy.

Unlike other beats, the White House beat combines focus on the President as a chief executive and a policymaker, as well as the staff in the White House that serve him (such as the Press Secretary). Before Twitter became popular and Donald J. Trump took office, the White House Press Corps was the president's link to the public (Kumar, 2008). The information could be delivered by the President himself or via surrogates such as the Presidential Press Secretary. There is a source of tension between the Press Secretary and the Press Corp as getting the information they seek versus the information that the White House wants them to have is at the heart of their job. Kumar (2008) says that original stories and exclusives do not come from the White House but other outside sources. Another reason why the White House beat is considered the hardest is because of the breadth of topics one has to cover. As the President is the Chief Executive, he has authority in decisions made by all government departments. Kumar (2008, p. 677) quotes Terry Hunt, senior White House Correspondent for the Associated Press, in saying "you have to be a mile wide and an inch deep, because there are so many things you have to cover. One day you're

dealing with the Middle East... This week reporters are dealing with Latin America... and then there is always immigration, economics and taxes."

Although it may appear on the outside that the White House has the upper hand on controlling the flow of information and the news agenda by selecting the information they release to journalists, Kumar (2008) suggests that this is not the case as journalists must decide for themselves what is newsworthy and what is simply 'publicity'. This could be why the behaviour of Sean Spicer toward journalists so often became the headline opposed to the policies or political events that he was supposed to be discussing. What is unique about the White House press corps is the way the media organisations work together due to the demand of covering the President wherever he goes (around the United States, or internationally on state visits). If the President is going to a location with a restriction on numbers, a small selection of the press corps called the 'press pool' will travel with the President and report back to the other members on the newsworthy moments during the event. The Press Pool is divided into four categories of organisations: print media, wire services, electronic media and photojournalists. Pools are also common if the President is meeting with a foreign dignitary in the Oval Office, the Roosevelt or the Cabinet room, as all three of these rooms can only accommodate a few dozen people (Kumar, 2008). Wire service reporters from the Associated Press, Reuters and Bloomberg, are all present in all pools, as are wire service photographers from the Associated Press, Reuters and Agence France Presse.

It should be noted that there are five pieces of criterion for joining the White House Press Corp as a 'hard pass' member (Kumar, 2008):

1. The reporter must work for a media organisation with a Washington bureau.
2. The person must have a letter from the bureau chief detailing why they need to be stationed at the White House.
3. The reporter must live in the Washington area.
4. The reporter must have a credential from the Congressional Press Gallery.
5. The reporter must be willing to go under a Secret Service Background Check.

## 2.5 Political/Journalist Source Relations

Downes (1998) believes that the relationship between the press and politicians, such as the President, can be described as co-dependent or symbiotic. As Sanders (2009) points out journalistic stories are structured around claims to facts and truth given to journalists by sources. The press secretary must be the source of facts and the liaison between the journalists and the president. Without the press secretary, political news in the United States would only be gossip and rumour (Sanders, 2009).

According to Davis (2003), public relations or 'spin-doctors' have become an important part of the reporting process due to the significant cutbacks of journalists' newsgathering resources. This argument is made across public relations literature (Shallot & Johnson, 2006; Macnamara, 2014). A concern critics have is that resource-rich entities such as governments and multinational corporations now have more control and influence over the news producers. Although Davis' (2003) book chapter "Public Relations and News Sources" in *News, Public Relations and Power* focuses on British Public Relations and the rise of the industry, the notions that Davis (2003) discusses can be applied to all promotional societies such as the United States of America. According to Davis (2003), the rise of public relations in the United Kingdom relates to the rise of political parties and electoral communications. From 1797-2001 Davis (2003) cites that the employment of Information Officers in Whitehall departments had doubled with the highest being in the Home Office which saw a 196 per cent increase in Information Officers employed. Davis (2003) states that since this rise there has been a media fascination with spin-doctoring in Westminster, as well as other central government institutions such as the White House. Around this era, there was also a rise in public relations practitioners in other sectors of society. For governments, public institutions and business there is a strong need to identify important publics/consumer-citizens to sell policies, products and compete for resources. Therefore, there is a difficulty in identifying what public relations work is and what is 'pure' journalism due to the journalists' dependencies on information subsidies such as press releases (Davis, 2003, p.31). Davis (2003) cites academics such as Hall (1978), who suggest that journalists are attracted to using institutions such as the government as sources to write their stories as usually governments are situated at the top of the hierarchy of credibility.

However, one would argue that this is not the case with the Trump administration. Since Spicer's first press briefing he was at odds with the media as he claimed the Donald J. Trump's presidential inauguration had 'the largest crowd to ever witness an inauguration, period (The White House, 2017). Journalists that uphold news values and fourth estate ideals will contest and attempt to discredit political communications that they believe are not true and damaging to democracy.

There is a tension between politicians (as well as their staff) and journalists in setting the news agenda. A key example of 'spin-doctors' performing news manipulation is mere minutes after the World Trade Centre was attacked in New York on September 11, 2001, Press Officer Jo Moore emailed her colleagues informing them 'it's now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury' (*Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 2001, as cited in Franklin, 2003). When Moore's email was leaked to the press, it received negative attention and outrage from politicians, journalists and the public. However, Franklin (2003) points out that this exercise in news manipulation was not new in 2001, and emphasises the packaging of politics. Franklin (2003) argues that the packaging of politics rests on journalists and their political source relations, and is typified by collaboration rather than conflict. This is despite the 'watchdog' ideals of journalism, as both journalists and politician/ press secretaries have interests that are aided by the other party. Politicians require media to convey their political message to the public, or more strategically to 'test the waters' around the public opinion on controversial policy possibilities, if the public has an adverse reaction, the policy can be dismissed as a 'mere press rumour' (Franklin, 2003). In turn, journalists must use politicians as sources to write credible political journalism (Franklin, 2003). Conflict, however, is still present in political/journalist source relations due to the divergent perceptions of the purpose for political communication. According to Franklin (2003), journalists perceive political communication as their duty to inform the public of political events and policies. However, politicians see political communication as a means to persuade the public that their policies are what is best for the country. Thus political communications are a negotiation between politician/press secretaries and journalists.

A set of rules guides the relationship between a political source and a journalist. There is also an opportunity for conflict between the two parties if one of these rules are broken (Franklin, 2003). Situations, where rules may be broken, include journalists publishing an 'off-the-record' conversation or politicians/their press secretaries 'leaking' information for stories to rival journalists, refuses an interview or denies a statement they previously made to a journalist. McNair (2002) suggests that the reason why political communicators such as press secretaries and journalists must foster a working relationship is because 'politics is the staple food for a journalist's work.' Downes (1998) notes that Press Secretaries often describe their relationship with the press as 'confrontational' and 'antagonistic'. In a focus group, Downes (1998) said that the press secretaries believed that the media saw them as flacks, barriers and spin doctors.

## 2.6 The Notion of Spin

Sanders (2009, p.29) cites the *Oxford English Dictionary* in defining spin as "a bias or slant on information, intended to create a favourable impression when presented to the public; an interpretation or viewpoint." In elaboration, Sanders (2009, p.30) adds "Spin Doctoring is the antithesis of letting the facts speak for themselves. It aims to manage and shape impressions and perceptions in a way most favourable to the communicator's cause. The term 'spin doctor' emerged in the 1980s and spin is seen as a shorthand for a manipulative, sinister, and threatening form of political public relations which goes far beyond the older more respectable work of the press officer or publicist (McNair, 2002). It is spin that Kumar (2008) claims makes the White House beat one of the most challenging for journalists as the press secretary may often only release information to the press corps that is favourable to the administration and refuse to disclose information that could lead to scandal. Sanders (2009) argues that spin has existed since people have been interested in exercising social influence. The press secretaries in Downes (1998) study did not see spin as a bad or unethical practice. Their view of spin was presenting their politician in the most favourable light. By the end of the twentieth century, spin was equivalent to message management rather than policy substance in political communication. A perfect example of this, according to Sanders (2009) was Bill Clinton's 1992 Presidential Campaign and

subsequently the messaging style of his administration. Clinton's press team carefully analysed the daily polls to see what messages needed to be communicated.

Journalists often believe that news management developed into a professional art in the latter part of the twentieth century, it is during this period that McNair (2002) claims that public relations became a *visible* (original emphasis) element in the process of political communication. To define an exact time of birth is contentious. In reality, McNair (2002) argues that the communicative practices that are associated with spin have existed before World War II, citing that political news management was an essential factor in the 'red scares' of the 1920s. Furthermore, McNair (2002) states that political public relations and 'spin' has organically grown alongside the evolution of liberal democracy, has public opinion plays in both notions. In extending this argument, McNair (2002) notes that the rise of spin is a reflection on the expanded information market, and the increased need for breaking news stories, along with journalists need to present unique angles in their story to stay profitable thus can be damaging in publicity terms. Spin seeks to shut down all meanings which are not preferable to the client.

The demonisation of spin has been birthed from the competitive journalism environment, as journalists not only have to compete with each other but also with political public relations professionals (McNair, 2002). Public relations as a communications discipline is now embedded into the infrastructure of a mass-mediated democracy. McNair (2002) presents the argument that like computers, cables and other communicative functions, public relations is not a negative in itself. In contemporary society, citizens live an information-dense environment, and public relations help journalists find information for citizens from official sources. Ideally, public relations professionals will follow the code of ethics that are set forth by public relations industry bodies such as *Public Relations Society of America* (PRSA) or *Public Relations Institute of New Zealand* (PRINZ).

## 2.7 News Values



Galtung and Ruge conducted their seminal study of news values and hierarchy in 1965. As Langer (2003) noted, their study found that stories surrounding elite individuals, corporations and countries were more likely to become news stories. It can be argued that Sean Spicer can be classed as an elite individual as his title of Press Secretary to the President of the United States, he was the spokesperson and surrogate for the President of the United States, Donald Trump. Trump was an internationally well-known businessman and reality television show *The Apprentice* host. By Langer's (2003) classification, Trump transitioned from a powerless elite to a powerful elite. This could have affected the manner in which Spicer's actions at the press briefings were reported rather than the policy discussed at the briefing. In total Galtung and Ruge's (1965) study found 12 news values (four of which adhere to a Western cultural context).

The eight news values categories they created were as follows:

1. *Frequency* - The time span for an event to unfold and acquire meaning. The more comparable the frequency of the event is to the frequency of the news medium, the more likely it will be recorded in the news media.
2. *Threshold* - There is a threshold that an event must pass before it gets recorded in the news, for example, the more violent the murder, the bigger the headlines.
3. *Unambiguity* - An event with clear interpretation and is free from ambiguities in its meaning is preferred to stories that are highly ambiguous.
4. *Ethnocentrism* - The event must have cultural proximity to the media consumers own culture. Media audiences are more likely to pay attention to the familiar or culturally similar, and the culturally distant will be passed by more efficiently and not be noticed. It should be noted that a culturally remote country may be brought into the news if they are in conflict with the media organisation's cultural group.
5. *Predictability* - A person predicts that something might happen, this creates a mental matrix for easy reception and registration. In this context 'news' is more like 'olds'.
6. *Unexpected* - the more unexpected an event is within meaningful culture, the more likely it is to feature in the news agenda.
7. *Continuity* - If an event has previously been classed as 'news', it will continue to feature as 'news'.

8. *Composition* - What other news stories have been selected can affect if an event is featured as news or not.

There are four further news values which Galtung and Ruge (1965, p. 68) say solely applies to a Western context.

1. If an event occurs in an *elite nation*, it is more likely to become a news story.
2. The more *elite people* concerned in the event, the more likely it is to become a news story.
3. If the event can elicit a strong sense of *identification* amongst news consumers, it is more likely to feature in the news.
4. The more *negative* an events consequences are, the more likely it will appear as a news item.

Bennett and Manheim (2001) note that as there are many narratives about political events that news stories often report the most straightforward and most dramatic themes of a political event. According to Hartley (1982), events are not news merely because they happen, they must also fit into the context of the other news stories. These events need to be known and credible sources that are representative, such as the White House press secretary (Hartley, 1982). Underwood (2001) highlights that scandal and sensational copy have infiltrated the traditional media outlets and on the internet (as opposed to just existing on gossip/entertainment outlets such as *PerezHilton.com*). Underwood (2001, p. 100) suggests that the public sphere ideals where intelligent dialogue about public life can be sustained are being forgotten as large media conglomerates treat the news as a 'product' to publicise and market their other business interests. He suggests that this is the reason why lifestyle articles about health, dieting and personal finance are presented in newspapers as market research suggests that audiences want to be informed of matters that 'touch them personally', rather than abstract, societal issues such as stories about, local council and national politics as well as stories about the courts. Sanders (2009) goes as far as to claim that entertainment values now often supersede informational values.

Langer (2003) notes that historically the term 'tabloid' was in reference to the size of a newspaper. A tabloid is half the size of a broadsheet allowing for better portability so

commuters could read the news on their journey to work or on their lunch break. Langer (2003, p. 135) also remarks that the word tabloid is currently used in a derogatory fashion to refer to news that can be classified as 'sensationalised', 'extravagant', 'over-dramatised' and focused almost entirely taking a human interest angle and focus on personality. Therefore, tabloid news is perceived as not being 'real journalism'. The representation of individuals in the tabloid news story must be scrutinised along with the institutional practices and assumptions that create meaning in the story. Langer (2003) cites television news critics such as Diamond (1975), Esslin (1982), Bennett (1988) as well as Postman and Powers (1992) who propose that television news has discarded the values of professional journalism in order to indulge in the presentation of gratuitous spectacles. Langer (2003) argues that television news' orientation and strategy produces what is often seen as irrelevant news, suggesting that often important stories are passed over in favour of stories that pertain more exciting visuals or visual highlights.

Controversy is increasingly becoming a vital news value, violent crime, and celebrity news has become a standard feature of television and other traditional media news. Langer (2003, p.137) refers to this as an "unwarranted preoccupation with drama". Underwood (2001) suggests that traditional government coverage and a reporting style that covers what was said at meetings have been replaced with stories that are quick to understand and exciting for the average news consumer. In contrast, Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) believe that political communication researchers downplay the importance that popular culture entertainment media has on public opinion. They argue that politics is largely a mediated experience, political assumptions and beliefs have a foundation on cultural values, and political attitudes and actions are interpreted through the lenses of cultural assumptions and shared cultural sources. The wall between entertainment media and political news has eroded as a result of the changes in media communication technology and the economy in the mass media (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001). The changed media environment now calls into question the authority of journalists, public officials and other political gatekeepers, who are increasingly challenged by other producers of political and social meaning. Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) suggest that the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal that came to light in 1998 is a key example of this erosion between political and entertainment news. Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) note that in 1998 when watching

morning television or listening to the radio, all channels and stations classed as news or entertainment were discussing the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal. The downsizing of media institutions for economic gain has meant that it is increasingly difficult for journalism to perform its public good function with the same degree of care as it could in the past century, as revenue becomes the main goal, the wall between what is news and what is entertainment erodes further. Delli Carpini and Williams (2001, p. 178) close their argument by suggesting that national United States politics had "been reduced to a sometimes amusing, sometimes melodramatic, but seldom relevant spectator sport."

Hartley (1982) notes that news values is not simply a list of criteria, news values are not natural nor are they neutral. Hartley (1982) argues that news values are an ideological code, suggesting that news values are fundamentally sexist. Hartley (1982, p. 80) quotes journalist Anna Coote in saying "these [news values] have been developed, of course by white, middle-class men, generation upon generation of them, forming opinions, imposing them, learning them, passing them on as Holy Writ."

In the news hierarchy beats that are considered the most prestigious are as follows:

1. The economy
2. Industry
3. Politics
4. Foreign Affairs

These beats are considered 'hard news', which are commonly deemed to be based upon facts, 'soft news' in contrast, are based upon description, individual experience, and nuance. These types of stories are commonly referred to as 'human interest stories' (Hartley, 1982, p. 81). Hartley (1982) also suggests that it does not matter if a journalist is female or male, they are unable to escape the institutionalised force of news values, even if the journalist contests the ideology. In other words, news values assist in the maintenance of the status quo. Not only do news values dictate news selection, they also dictate news construction. This is evident in news values favouring stories about notable people, for example if a sports star and a shop owner were in a car accident, the news story would focus on the sports star more than the shop owner. According to Hartley (1982) news follows a model of consensus, this requires a notion of unity: one people, one nation, one society. This is an ideological notion that is often characterised by phrases such as 'our economy' or 'our police force'.

Despite this there is still an assumption of hierarchy of the sphere of society. Elite people include Chief Executive Officers and World Leaders and stories and events from their lives will be prioritise over to the events and stories from people in professions such as primary school teachers and taxi drivers. People in societies do not solely come from one cultural background, but the news is centred around the dominant culture's worldview. Dominant ideology constructs people as subjects, rather than feeling individuals (Hartley, 1982). In the United States, the news is presented from a capitalistic, white American perspective.

Hartley (1982, p. 83) also elaborates on the fact that these assumptions are not 'personal opinion'. He calls them instead 'routine mental orientations' (Hartley, 1982, p.83), this means that individuals in society have a shorthand system to make sense of the world around them. An issue with this is that the consensual model requires society to be 'everyone', therefore dissidents can be branded in the news as mad or malicious. It is apparent that what can be classed as a dissident is reliant on temporal structures. Hartley (1982) cites a model from Hall et al. (1987), this places the LGBTQI\* community and sex educators in the sphere of dissidents, in 2018 they should be included as a part of civil society. Hartley (1982) notes that if individuals have not had contact with a certain people group, the news media is from where individuals gather their assumptions. If an individual does have experience with the discussed people group, the discourse of the media and the individual's personal experience will meld together to create the individual's assumptions regarding the people group.

## 2.8 The Mediated Political Public Sphere

The mediated public sphere is the concept of the public sphere and the notion of democratic discussion regarding social and political issues playing out through media. Such media that facilitate the mediated public sphere include television, talkback radio, newspapers and the internet. Jackson and Valentine (2014) wrote a journal article about how internet news sites and their comment sections, as well as Twitter reactions, enable democratic deliberation by assessing the engagement of the users of this sphere. This piece of literature is critical to assess in this thesis as articles from online news sites are the

sample data for this research. Habermas (1989) sees the public sphere as a domain in social life in which public opinion can be formed out of rational public debate. Jackson and Valentine (2014) note that when Habermas (1989) conceived the notion of the public sphere, he acknowledged that the social configuration of the day partially determined the nature and limits of public space. Thus, Jackson and Valentine (2014) argue that the internet or cyberspace as a public sphere is comparable to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century coffee houses in Britain and the salons of France, where Habermas' public sphere originated. However, the internet eliminates geographical barriers so arguably any individual connected to the internet has the opportunity to engage in public sphere debates. Thus an individual in New Zealand and an individual in New Jersey are able to converse in the mediated public sphere and have a democratic discussion about the Trump administration. Moreover, the barriers of temporality can be removed until a town hall meeting or a coffee house discussion; there does not need to be a time limit nor a starting time on debates in the mediated public sphere. Just as the changes in communication services have delivered society with 24-hour news, through hand-held devices, individuals now have access to a 24-hour public sphere.

Access to communication is one of the key measures of power and equality in modern democracies, the space in which citizens communicate about politics, government and societal institutions is referred to as the public sphere (Bennett & Entman, 2001). This space can exist in many different physical forms, from cafes and town halls to internet chat rooms and message boards to the exchange of opinions in newspapers and magazines, as well as talkback radio and television programming (Bennett & Entman, 2001). The idea of the public sphere is associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas (1989), an ideal public sphere allows for all citizens to have equal access to communications independent from the constraints of governments, religious institutions, and other social powers in order to build consensus around the decisions of government. The information that allows for the ideal of the public sphere to occur is disseminated through mass media technologies such as television, radio, newspapers, and especially the internet which has allowed for the possibility of the global public sphere and could be viewed as a possible reason for why Sean Spicer became a recurring figure in the international news media. Bennett and Entman (2001) however, hypothesise that the large media corporations are also responsible for the lessening political engagement and the discouraging participation in the public sphere via commercial

programming and a focus on content with high entertainment value. This is especially the case in the United States, which has a relatively unregulated and highly commercialised media economy.

McNair (2000), outlines how the multi-layered media market constructs the contemporary public sphere. This is structured by socio-economic audience demographics such as social class, professional status and educational level. McNair (2000) suggests that these demographics distinguish the separate media-markets and can estimate a person's engagement with the political public sphere. McNair (2000) states that there is not a precise nor agreed upon terminology, but this thesis will reference the terminology which he uses, they are the three main categories of *elite*, *mid-market*, and *popular* (McNair, 2000, p. 14, original emphasis). It should be noted that in this context *Elite* does not refer to the content nor style being of a qualitative superiority rather the outlets have an audience that mainly includes individuals from an above average income, education level, or profession, for example people who hold doctorates, lawyers, financial services professionals, and medical professionals (McNair, 2000). These distinctions can be made across broadcast media and print media genres. Although McNair's (2000) work focuses on the British media market, his logic can be applied to the United States media market, as well as the media markets of other democratic countries. However, the data gathering sample of media organisations includes British media outlets. The two newspapers are *Financial Times* and *Guardian*. The sample also includes television outlets, BBC News and Sky News. All four media outlets according to McNair (2000) belong to the *elite* political media market. The market the outlet belongs to informs on the style, content, and newsworthiness of political content. *Elites* are read by the upper and middle classes and are the most information-dense and if judged by content, the most editorially committed to the coverage of politics. *Elite* outlets are seen to be more likely to cover matters of political policy. *Mid-Markets* seek to serve what McNair (2000, p.16) describes as "moderately affluent, socially and morally conservative people concerned about, but not obsessed with politics, mainly in so far as it affects their personal incomes and quality of life. McNair (2000) remarks that mid-market media outlets editorial leanings will conform to the current ideological leanings of this middle class audience. *Popular* media outlets serve the unskilled working class and the underclass either neglect politics and policy altogether or they are highly politicised, biased towards one certain

ideology. These outlets are more likely to focus on political leadership struggles and politician's sex scandals rather than a City Council debate about a new school bus stop.

Langer (2003) argues that a liberal democracy must have an informed citizenry who can make well-thought decisions based on the available information, especially in regards to politics. Thus, it is the duty of the journalist to shed light and make sense of information that can often be presented in a complicated, untidy way and often not the whole story. In doing this, journalists act as the nation's (if not the world's) watchdog, holding those with power to account.

Underwood (2001, p. 99) quoted veteran *Minneapolis Star Tribune* business reporter Mike Meyers saying "These guys (the newspaper executives) are wringing their hands when they are making a 20 per cent return on equity. The First Amendment wasn't written for return on equity. When I got into business, I never encountered this." Underwood's (2001) chapter "Reporting and the Push for Market-Orientated Journalism" in the book *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (2001) highlights the tension that media outlets face in whether to treat their audiences as consumers or as citizens. The tabloidisation of news with short copy and at-a-glance summaries can be seen as anti-intellectual and underestimating the intelligence of their audiences. As media organisations began to reduce the size of their newsrooms and shifting their focus away from public affairs reporting in the last two decades of the twentieth century, public relations firms and political spinning 'think-tanks' began to shape the news media content to be in favour of their commercial or political interests, stifling opportunity for public debate (Underwood, 2001).

## 2.9 Political Performance

"Politics is a communicative practice, requiring embodied subjects who can perform and engage in speech acts in a domain that is public, where others can witness and freely respond to those performances and speech acts." (Craig, 2016, p. 1). Craig (2016) notes that performance often possesses negative connotations of superficiality, and suggests that an attractive smile and personality becomes more integral to political success than policy and



ideas. Thus one would think that an abrasive personality such as Spicer's would contribute to political failure. Craig (2016) argues that political performance is intrinsic to political communication and has a legitimate function in political rhetoric. This is because policy and ideas are communicated through speech acts. In order to be persuasive, a political figure must have a mastery of voice, gesture, and general bodily deportment. Political figures (whether that be President or Press Secretary) are mediated through communication technologies and journalistic interpretation. These performances are then disseminated to media audiences which include constituents and the international community, who experience political figures through a mediated context, rather than an interpersonal or live context (Craig, 2016). The disciplined bodies of those working in the political communication fields are efficient and comprehensive bodies, where there is an appropriate melding of personality and knowledge, deference and authority in order to communicate persuasively. In this mediated political culture dramatic visual moments and sound bites are dominant (Craig, 2016).

Habitus, which is the amalgamation of an individual's personality and character, manner of speaking, style of dress, as well as their upbringing and professional background must also be scrutinised in order to understand the purpose of their actions in their political performance (Craig, 2016). It is a person's habitus that allows them to be relatable to others. Habitus suggests that people are the product of their social conditions. According to Bourdieu (1990), habitus is an embodied history that becomes second nature and therefore is forgotten as history. Habitus is an active presence of the whole past of which it is a product, which according to Bourdieu (1990, pp. 55-56) generates the 'reasonable', 'common sense' behaviours that are adjusted to a particular field. Habitus seeks to explain how an individual's social class, education, and race implicates individuals' opinions, bodily deportment, and actions. This means that one could relate a stiff bodily deportment to serving in the armed forces. Bourdieu (1990, p. 56) sums up this sentiment best with the following quote:

In each one of us, in differing degrees, is contained the person we were yesterday, and indeed, in the nature of things it is even true that our past *personae* (original emphasis) predominate in us, since the present is necessarily insignificant when compared with the long period of the past because of which we have emerged in the

form today. It is just that we don't directly feel the influence of these past selves precisely because they are rooted within us.

Like Craig (2016), Sanders (2009) discusses political performance, or as she called it symbolic politics. Symbolic politics encompasses the people in politics and the scandals. In media democracies, politics is cast in a dramatic form. Political media stories are populated with heroes and villains. It can be claimed that "the packaging of politics usurps its content" (Sanders, 2009, p. 41). Sanders (2009) explores in her book the basic concepts such as symbol, as well as person and image and how these concepts relate to the practice and understanding of politics.

Sanders (2009, p. 41) cites Boethius in defining person as 'an individual substance of rational nature' and contrasts this with Goffman's belief that a person defines themselves through their actions in a variety of situations. Thus, a person is a set of 'masks' like actors would wear in Ancient Greek theatre. It can be said that human beings regularly perform roles. Image, therefore, is understood to mean the figurative representation of something or someone, a version of one's self that is displayed to the public when performing a role, such as President or Press Secretary. The relationship between the real and the presented self is often unclear. As politics is a mediated and staged phenomenon, image and person plays a part in affecting public opinion. In an effort to represent oneself, a person will use words, actions and gestures to command respect in their position, such as a businessman wearing a suit during work hours, or a funeral attendee wearing black to symbolise that they are mourning with the family. By this logic, Spicer could have been said to appear as a news story because his actions as Press Secretary were outside of the expected actions a press secretary would perform. Often the drama of political spectacles is prioritised over policymaking as politics becomes a product of media consumption.

Sanders (2009) further adds that political performance can be explored through Kenneth Burke's theory of dramaturgical communication. According to Sanders (2009), Burke believed that life was a play and the rhetoric of language is what drive the symbolism and action of the play. Burke's *pentad* can be used to analyse political actions through the following set of questions.

**Act:** What is the action that has been taken?

**Agent:** Who has performed this action?

**Agency:** How or with what did they do it?

**Scene:** Where in the physical sense has this action taken place? Also, what is the cultural and social contexts?

**Purpose:** Why did they do it and what was their intention? (Sanders, 2009, p. 46).

Sean Spicer insisting reporter April Ryan stop shaking her head could be evaluated through this model.

## 2.10 Conclusion

This literature review has synthesised and contrasted seminal academic works and critical theories that relate to the topic of this thesis. Firstly, this chapter examined the specificity of the press briefing, and how questions and follow-up questions made the press briefing a dialogical communicative encounter (Schubert, 2012). This chapter established that press briefing themselves are traditionally not newsworthy, they do however provide the 'raw ingredients' (McCurry, 2009). Highlighting why the topic of this thesis deserves close and critical study. This chapter also introduces the concepts of the role of the White House press secretary, the White House press corps, political/journalist source relations, spin, news values, the mediated public sphere, and political performance.

This thesis seeks to draw together political performance, political/source relations, and news values to analyse the reportage of Sean Spicer's performance during the White House press briefing. All eight of these concepts fuse together to create a framework of understanding and analysis for future chapters of this thesis. Without understanding and acknowledging the past research that relates to this topic, it is not possible to accurately answer the research questions set forth in the previous chapter.

### 3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework and research design of this thesis. Through the researching for the literature review chapter of this thesis, a pattern of methods used was recurrent. Content Analysis was used to analyse diaries and newspaper articles by scholars such as Mucciaroni and Martinelli (2007). Krippendorff (2004) notes that content analysis has been used to examine newspapers and journalistic texts since 1893. Journalism Discourse Analysis will also be utilised for this thesis, as the White House press corps and press secretary Spicer engaged in multiple conflicts throughout his tenure. Journalism Discourse Analysis is an abridged version of Critical Discourse Analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis is a qualitative method that examines why individuals and organisations subscribe to their version of truth (Graham, 2005; Stoddart 2007). This chapter will also explain the research design for this study, detailing what will be analysed, how it will analyse and why it will be analysed.

#### 3.1 Content Analysis

The *Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* defines content analysis as “analysis of the manifestation and latent content of a body of communicated materials (as a book or film) through classification, tabulation, and evaluation of its key symbols and themes in order to ascertain its meaning about probable effect” (as cited in Krippendorff, 2004, p. xvii). This method is a research technique that allows a researcher to make replicable and valid conclusions from texts to the context of their use (Krippendorff, 2004). As a scientific tool, the purpose of a content analysis is to be objective and can be divorced from the researcher's personal authority. It is the replicability of results that shows that content analysis is a reliable research tool, according to Krippendorff (2004). It must be noted that the term ‘text’ in this context is not only pertaining to written materials but any artefact that can be scrutinised, such as video or audio recordings. ‘Text’ thus refers to the reading of a text, how it is used in a social context and its analysis in a metaphoric sense (Krippendorff, 2004).

Three different starting points can drive content analyses:

1. Text-driven: These content analyses are motivated by the availability of texts that stimulate the researcher's interest in them. The genre of texts commonly used in text-driven content analyses includes a collection of personal letters, a collection of taped interviews, a diary of a noteworthy person, election campaign speeches and news accounts of a particular crime. The research questions emerge as the texts are being analysed, hence text-driven analyses are commonly referred to as 'fishing expeditions' (Krippendorff, 2004).
2. Problem-driven: these content analyses are motivated by epistemic questions about currently inaccessible phenomena, events or processes that the researcher believe that the texts may be able to answer. Krippendorff (2004) explains that this is what drives mass-media researchers who are intending to substantiate their claims on media effects on civic society in political coverage or lawyers wishing to refute plagiarism claims. The content analyst must convert their problem into a series of research questions, which they intend to answer through an exploration of texts.
3. Method-driven: these content analyses have been motivated by the researcher's desire to apply the method to areas of interest that have been explored by other means.

The content analysis that will be used for this thesis will be a problem driven, as it is motivated out of the conflict that occurred between the White House Press corps and the White House Press secretary Sean Spicer. This type of content analysis is regularly used to infer the political leanings of newspaper editors (Krippendorff, 2004).

In content analyses, the units of the study need not be motivated physically nor statistically. Krippendorff (2004) notes that a political speech serves as an example of explaining this. A layperson may listen to the speech and respond to it as a whole experience; a political analyst would divide the speech into separate parts, addressing different social or political issues, analysing how a politician presents the problem and whether they provide a solution to define the speech as an attack, an acclaim or a defence. Alternatively, a linguist would break the speech into separate sentences to analyse. A content analyst does not just collect one speech, but many speeches delivered during the same political campaign and identify different kinds of units, compare them to one another and relate them to other data. Units emerge from a process of reading, and thus the analyst must be a competent reader. Units,

therefore, are often referred to as a function of empirical tenacity. In content analysis, units can be categorised into three distinctions, sampling units, recording/coding units and context units. These units, although distinct, work together to ensure that the analysis is not biased.

As it would be impossible in the time constraints of writing a thesis to analyse every article that mentions Sean Spicer, a content analysis must be limited to a manageable body of texts. However, efforts must be made to minimise a sampling bias. Sampling theory, therefore, is a theory of representation, to combat a sampling bias, the media organisations included in the sample will be situated at various points across the political spectrum.

### 3.2 Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) is a term that is commonly used indiscriminately and used to describe a number of different approaches to analyse oral communication, written communication, sign language or any semiotic event. As previously mentioned, Discourse Analysis is not only used in communications studies but also international relations, anthropology, social work, linguistics, and biblical studies. Each area has unique sets of assumptions, dimensions of analyses, and methodologies, thus there is no clear consensus on how to approach and perform a discourse analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). What the different strands of Discourse Analysis share is the view that language serves as a means of social construction (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This thesis will be utilising Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, which has been influenced by Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis infers that power relations are discursive.

To define Critical Discourse Analysis succinctly, it is language as social practice (Wodak & Meyers, 2001). According to Machin and Mayr (2012, p.3), 'language is inseparable from the way we build our societies and the way we act in them'. Critical Discourse Analysis is concerned with the relations between texts and power, as well as a negotiation of conflicting ideologies (Fairclough, 2010). This method involves understanding the interpersonal function of language, which is key for constructing meaning from press briefing interactions. Critical Discourse Analysis concerns itself with news texts, political

speeches, and other communications activities that can be relevant to a Press secretary and other political figures, its purpose is to highlight the ideological notions of representations of events and people, which may exist below the surface of what may appear neutral. Critical Discourse Analysis seeks to reveal the ideas, absences and assumptions that are found within texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Fairclough (2010) discusses the discourse of the classroom and the conflict that may arise between teachers and students. Spicer was often referred to in the media as a kindergarten (or new entrant) teacher failing to take control of his classroom (the White House Press corps). There is a power struggle between the administration and the Press corps during the press briefings over what is a true account of events that have occurred. This shows a power struggle between the holding legitimate power as the surrogate of the President and the ideals of the First Amendment, the public sphere and the freedom of the press. Semiosis (the theory and process of meaning-making) must be considered in critical discourse analysis as it has genuine effects on social practices, social institutions and the social order. Semiosis is performative as individuals tend to speak or write to evoke a response (Fairclough, 2010). It is essential that semiosis is incorporated into a broader social context.

The term 'discourse' can be used in a variety of contexts. Discourse can refer to 'meaning-making as an element of the social process' (Fairclough, 2010, p. 230), and 'the language that is associated with a particular social field or practice' (Fairclough, 2010, p.230), for example, journalistic discourse, political discourse or medical discourse. The term discourse can also refer to 'a way of construing aspects of the world associated a particular social perspective, for example a 'neo-liberal discourse on globalisation' (Fairclough, 2010, p.230). Discourse Analysis is concerned with various semiotic modalities including verbal and written language, visual images, and body language. Critical Discourse Analysis also investigates the relationship between the semiotic and other social elements. Critical Social Research attempts to address social '*wrongs*' (Fairclough, 2010, p. 231, original emphasis), such as injustice, inequality and lack of freedom, by analysing their sources and assessing how the wrong can be overcome. Machin and Mayr (2012) note that often the smallest linguistic choices that a communicator makes is where the power relations and the political ideologies can be found. This thesis attempts to address the social wrong of the Trump

administration's attacks on freedom of the press and how this affects the democracy and the public sphere. Critical Discourse Analysis seeks to identify how unequal power structures are established and maintained, as well as the ideological processes of this occurrence and how it can affect human well-being. Critical Discourse Analysis oscillates between focuses on the structures of social practice and the strategies of social agents, which can be organisations, governments, and people. This focus can include analysing the shift in orders of discourse and how this constitutes a social change in existing structures. According to Fairclough (2010), the method of critical discourse analysis can be separated into four stages.

Stage One: Focus upon a social wrong in its semiotic aspect. First, one must select a research problem that can be analysed in a transdisciplinary way. The disciplines that will be drawn upon in this thesis are political communication, public relations, interpersonal communication, and journalism studies. There should also be a particular focus on dialectical relations between semiotic and other moments. The topic of this thesis was selected when there was a noticeable shift in the reportage of the information from White House press briefing. Spicer was no longer just credited as President Trump's Press secretary but had established his own identity in the media. From the topic, one must then identify objects of research. The objects of research for this thesis are the interactions between Sean Spicer and members of the press corps, such as April Ryan, negative language used to describe Sean Spicer. One must also draw upon relevant bodies of theory to posit about the objects of research, such as the theories that have been discussed in the literature review of this thesis.

Stage Two: Identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong. This stage involves pondering how social life is constructed for this social wrong to occur and how it remains resistant to correction. It is at this stage that one must select 'texts' to analyse that address the dialectical relations between orders of discourse and social events and carry out interdiscursive and linguistic/semiotic analyses of the selected texts. The linguistic choices and possible visual images of the events may be analysed. Interdiscursive analysis compares how genres, discourses and styles are expressed together and how the discourses play out in social practices. Thus, the social wrong is inherent to the social order.



Stage Three: Considering why the social order 'needs' this social wrong. If a social order allows for a social wrong, one must consider and state why the social wrong needs to be changed. This connects the questioning of ideology as discourse is ideological because its contribution to sustaining certain relations of power and domination.

Stage Four: Identify possible strategies to move past these obstacles. This stage moves the analyses from a negative critique to a positive critique. Analysis of the social structure must occur in an attempt to discover a semiotic 'point of entry' into research on how the obstacles can be tested, challenged and overcome. One must take into account how individuals in society react to dominant discourse and how it affects their well-being.

### 3.3 Research Design

Krippendorff (2004) states that all content analyses must be guided by a set of research questions, as previously mentioned the research questions of this thesis are:

- 1) How does Sean Spicer's political performance in press briefings affect his relationship with the White House press corps and their reportage?
- 2) How do the media organisations' ideological biases effect the reportage of Sean Spicer's political performance?
- 3) How do news values and conventions of political journalism influence the nature of the reportage about Sean Spicer and his press briefing?

There are three key events from Sean Spicer's tenure of the Press secretary that will be analysed in this thesis. The three case studies are Spicer's first address to the White House Press corps regarding the crowd size of President Trump's inauguration, Press Briefing #30, when Sean Spicer told Press corps member April Ryan to 'stop shaking her head' and finally Press Briefing #36, when Sean Spicer claimed that 'not even Hitler' was as bad as Bashar al-Assad the President of Syria because Hitler did not 'drop chemical weapons on his own people'. News stories of these three events will be taken from thirty media outlets to create a maximum sample of ninety news stories. The transcripts of the press briefings and Sean

Spicer’s first statement will also be analysed in comparison to the news stories concerning them. Transcripts are not allowed to be edited as they are to be an accurate record of the proceedings (Kumar, 2008).

In order to be selected for this study, the media outlet’s must have a member of the White House press corps employed in their organisation. Media organisations that make up the White House press corps are from different genre of media, for example, print, broadcast television, cable television, online and radio. There are more media organisations represented in the White House press corps, however the organisations have that been selected for this study are all reputable news outlets and represent multiple ideologies across the political spectrum. This study will analyse the online content produced by the media organisation. The media organisations that have been selected from the White House Press corps for analysis are:

*Table 1: News Media Organisations in the sample*

<i>1. The New York Times</i>	<i>2. Fox News</i>	<i>3. The Wall Street Journal</i>
<i>4. CNN</i>	<i>5. The Associated Press (AP)</i>	<i>6. Reuters</i>
<i>7. CBS News</i>	<i>8. ABC News</i>	<i>9. The Washington Post</i>
<i>10. NBC News</i>	<i>11. National Public Radio</i>	<i>12. The Chicago Tribune</i>
<i>13. Politico</i>	<i>14. American Urban Radio Networks</i>	<i>15. USA Today</i>
<i>16. The Hill</i>	<i>17. MSNBC</i>	<i>18. Al Jazeera (English)*</i>
<i>19. New York Post</i>	<i>20. Bloomberg News</i>	<i>21. The New York Daily News</i>
<i>22. Time Magazine</i>	<i>23. Christian Science Monitor</i>	<i>24. Yahoo!</i>
<i>25. The Guardian*</i>	<i>26. BuzzFeed</i>	<i>27. The Financial Times*</i>
<i>28. The Boston Globe</i>	<i>29. BBC News*</i>	<i>30. Sky News*</i>

The \* symbol next to certain outlets indicate that their media organisation is based outside of the United States of America.

It is expected that some outlets may have chosen to not cover all of Sean Spicer's actions in the press briefings and may have chosen to report on the policy discussed in the briefing instead. If an outlet has not published an article about a case study, the outlet will be excluded in the case study's calculations.

The following content analysis will focus on three case studies that were headline stories in the news media:

- A. Sean Spicer's first briefing as President Trump's press secretary when he incorrectly stated the crowd size of the President's inauguration.
- B. Press briefing #30: Sean Spicer telling White House press corps member, April D. Ryan to stop shaking her head during a Press Briefing.
- C. Press briefing #36: Sean Spicer claiming Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was worse than Adolf Hitler, Leader of the German Nazi Party.

These three events have been selected as they were the most controversial during Sean Spicer's brief tenure as press secretary, this benefits the research design for two reasons. Firstly, as they drew controversy, they were widely reported on so that the thirty media organisations were represented in the sample. Secondly, these instances are typical and reflective of the Trump administration's relationship with the news media.

In the news articles relating to these stories, four indicators will be coded for in the first three paragraphs of the article. These four indicators are:

1. Is Sean Spicer the first subject identified in the article?
2. Are Sean Spicer's actions in the press briefing first described as being aggressive or accusatory? There are two type of aggressive behaviour, legitimate aggressive behaviour and illegitimate aggressive behaviour. Legitimate aggressive behaviours include condemning foreign leaders and governments, this type of aggressive behaviour is expected by journalists and academics. Illegitimate aggressive behaviours pertain to chiding journalists like the schoolmarm from the novel *Matilda* and taking these jeremiads onto a personal level. It is important to note that

throughout Spicer's tenure, he exercised both legitimate aggressive behaviour when calling out the Assad regime and illegitimate aggression when he accused the press corps of falsely reporting on the inauguration's crowd size and when he told April Ryan to 'stop shaking her head' and accused her of pushing an agenda. Both of these forms of aggression are separated into sub-categories. These distinctions have been concluded through the author's own analytical perspective. The coded results tables in the appendices only show the relevant form of aggression to the case study.

3. Is there objective reportage of Spicer's actions and remarks from the press briefing?
4. Is there subjective commentary on what Spicer has said or done in the press briefing?

Following binary logic, the articles will be coded using 1= indicator present in first three paragraphs or 0= indicator not present in first three paragraphs.

The coding will be sorted into three different tables. Each table will relate to a case study and the newspaper articles in the sample will be identified as A1, A2, A3... for news stories relating to Spicer's initial press briefing; B1, B2, B3... for news stories relating to press briefing #30; C1, C2, C3 for news stories about press briefing #36. These coded results can be found in the appendices E, F, and G.

Discourse Analysis will then be utilised to show why Spicer's and the press corps' conflicts occur over defining what truth is. Spicer and the Trump administration's discourse is that President Trump is a strong leader and that the administration is competent, whereas members of the White House Press corps believe that President Trump and his administration are not competent in their positions, are damaging their First Amendment rights. The critical discourse analysis will assist the analyses of how media organisation's ideologies affect their relationship with Sean Spicer and what news values the media organisations attribute to the case studies mentioned above.

Taking this background knowledge into account this thesis' analyses will be generally motivated by the steps of critical discourse analysis and will not engage in a fine-grained analysis of language use, as power structures and how the structures inform the social

needs that are the overarching issues of this research. This thesis uses a gluten-free discourse analysis per se.

The media organisations that have been selected for the discourse analysis are indicated on the following table.

*Table 2: Outlets by ideologies*

	<b>Liberal</b>	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Non-biased</b>
<b>Newspaper</b>	<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	
<b>Cable News Channel</b>	<i>CNN</i>	<i>Fox News</i>	
<b>News Wire Services</b>			<i>AP/ Reuters</i>

As previously mentioned in the literature review chapter, this thesis will investigate the relationship between the White House press secretary, Sean Spicer and the White House press corps through the theoretical framework of news values and the public sphere, political performance, spin and the fourth estate/First Amendment. Fairclough (2010) believes that critical social research in politics should be anchored in the public sphere. This thesis deals with issues that occur in the mediated public sphere, where citizens are not co-present but connected to one another via the mass media and electronic communication devices.

### 3.4 Conclusion

The research design of this thesis breaks the analysis into three parts; each subsequent analysis chapters will focus on answering each research question respectively. The methods of Content Analysis and Journalism Discourse Analysis have been selected to work in tandem because then the findings of this study will be both quantitative and qualitative. Content Analysis will be used to highlight the frequency of which Press secretary Sean Spicer

is discussed using language that has negative and combative connotations. Content Analysis has been selected for this thesis as it is a favoured method of many communication studies researchers, especially Mucciarone and Martinelli (2007) who conducted a Content Analysis on the diary of Stephen Early, who was the longest-serving press secretary, under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Journalism Discourse Analysis will then be used to compare what is represented in the article to what was written in the transcript of the briefing and video recordings of the briefing, where possible. An abridged Critical Discourse Analysis (which has been referred to as Journalism Discourse Analysis in this thesis) has been selected as this thesis is attempting to offer a solution of a social wrong which is able to occur through the power of the Trump administration and their credibility of being the executive branch of government for an elite nation.

## 4. Tables of content analysis results

This is a short chapter that aims to present the findings of the content analysis in table form. Then, inferences from the tables of data will be given and contextualised in order for the data to be more than just numbers on a page. The subsequent discussions in this thesis will draw on the results and inferences from these tables, and analysed through the theories outlined in the literature review that relate to political performance, political source relations and news values.

*Table 3: Intial Press Briefing Results*

<b>1. Spicer First Quoted</b>	<b>2A. Illegitimate Aggressive Behaviour</b>	<b>2B. Legitimate Aggressive Behaviour</b>	<b>3. Objective Reportage</b>	<b>4. Subjective Comment</b>
23/28 82%	25/28 89%	0/28 0%	16/28 57%	23/28 82%

*Table 4: Press Briefing #30 (April Ryan) Results*

<b>1. Spicer First Quoted</b>	<b>2A. Illegitimate Aggressive Behaviour</b>	<b>2B. Legitimate Aggressive Behaviour</b>	<b>3. Objective Reportage</b>	<b>4. Subjective Comment</b>
11/21 52%	20/21 95%	0/21 0%	13/21 62%	13/21 62%

*Table 5: Press Briefing #36 (Assad/Hitler) Results*

<b>1. Spicer First Quoted</b>	<b>2A. Illegitimate Aggressive Behaviour</b>	<b>2B. Legitimate Aggressive Behaviour</b>	<b>3. Objective Reportage</b>	<b>4. Subjective Comment</b>
28/29 97%	0/29 0%	26/29 95%	18/29 62%	22/29 76%

Table 6: Total Sample Results

<b>1. Spicer First Quoted</b>	<b>2A. Illegitimate Aggressive Behaviour</b>	<b>2B. Legitimate Aggressive Behaviour</b>	<b>3. Objective Reportage</b>	<b>4. Subjective Comment</b>
47/78	45/78	26/78	47/78	58/78
79%	57.7%	33.4%	60%	74%

#### 4.1 Inferences from results.

From the data taken from the content analysis, it is clear that the articles published about Spicer contained more subjective comment in the headline and first three paragraphs in the article than objective reportage. It should be noted that both objective reportage and subjective comment did appear simultaneously in articles at a frequency of 32 per cent. This highlights that Spicer was reported on as a subject during his tenure as press secretary frequently, rather than as a source for the news. This is uncommon for an American Press secretary. Spicer was also first quoted in the articles at a frequency of 82 per cent, this is interesting so early in his tenure, it would have been more likely a more well-known person be referenced as the first source.

What is most interesting is that the articles pertaining to Spicer’s confrontation with April Ryan had the lowest frequency of subjective comment. One could believe that this event would have led to the highest percentage subject comment as the journalists’ could have seen Spicer’s confrontation with Ryan as an attack on one of their colleagues and the profession and would feel the need to defend her honour. Despite this belief, the April Ryan articles also had the lowest frequency of Sean Spicer being the first quoted in the article. Just under half of the articles quote April Ryan first, and attempt to explain the conventions of the press briefing in the first three paragraphs, as well as April Ryan’s career history. Subjective commentary and objective reporting can appear simultaneously in an article, both indicators were found in 62 per cent of the press briefing #30 news stories. Subjective commentary does however, appear in many articles after the first three paragraphs that were coded in this content analysis.



It is important to note that there are two types of aggressive behaviour that Sean Spicer performed in his press briefings that is reported on. First, is illegitimate aggression, such as insinuating that the press corps are purposefully reporting untruths and telling a veteran journalist to stop shaking her head in a press briefing. This type of aggression was documented more frequently in the sample with 57.7 per cent of the sample showing Spicer's illegitimate aggression. The second is legitimate aggression, such as calling out injustices performed by foreign governments. The frequency of legitimate aggression in the sample was 33.4 per cent and interestingly, it only appeared in articles regarding Sean Spicer's comparison of Assad, President of Syria to Adolf Hitler Nazi Party Leader and the architect of the Holocaust. The reason why Spicer's call out of the Assad Regime became a global news headline was because of the absurdity of Spicer's comparison to Adolf Hitler and his repeated assertion that the Nazis did not use chemical weapons, despite the historical evidence that 1.1 million people died in gas chambers in Auschwitz alone. Spicer's claims that they were not 'Hitler's own people' could be construed as dehumanising.

## 5. Sean Spicer's political performance

In a mediated society such as the United States, political performance is an important element to a political operative's success. As Craig (2016, p. 75) suggests, "Successful communication does not derive necessarily from the demonstration of political truths but from the presentation of a habitus that fuses political authority with performative style: politicians must convey their knowledge and expertise as well as an appealing and engaging personality." Craig's (2016) claim for how politicians successfully communicate can be extended to the surrogates of politicians, such as the White House press secretary. When the White House Press secretary addresses the White House press corps at the daily press briefing, they are performing their duties as the representative of the President of the United States. Craig (2016) also notes that in Ancient Greece, politics was seen as a public performance, and the Ancient Greeks were astute at discerning what was empty or manipulative rhetoric. The Ancient Greeks also had a fundamental appreciation for the process of communicating ideas and persuading others in a dialogical context. Spicer's political performance can be seen as a reflection of Trump's political performance as a candidate and as the President. Both Spicer and Trump treat the media as being incapable of telling the truth. This chapter argues that the Trump administration has transformed politics into a monological communicative encounter.

This is made evident in the findings of the content analysis, where 57.7 per cent of the news articles in the sample contained a reference to Sean Spicer's illegitimate behaviour. Illegitimate behaviour appeared in two of the three case studies in the sample. In the data for Sean Spicer's first press briefing, 89 per cent of the news articles reported in the first three paragraphs that Spicer shouted falsehoods and accused the media of inaccurately reporting on President Trump's Inauguration crowd size and distributing doctored photos of the crowd in comparison to the inauguration of Former President Barack Obama. The second case study, when Spicer instructed April Ryan, the member of the White House Press corps representing the American Urban Radio Networks, to "Stop shaking her head, again", 95 per cent of the news media outlets reported in the first three paragraphs that Spicer performed illegitimate aggression towards Ryan.

Only the case study of Sean Spicer comparing the airstrikes in Syria performed under the order of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, to the war crimes that occurred under control of Adolf Hitler, leader of Nazi Germany exhibits legitimate aggression. It is under the scope of a press secretary to comment on the actions of a foreign government. However, the absurdity of Spicer's claims is what makes the story newsworthy and needs analysis. Ninety-Five per cent of media outlets reported legitimate aggressive behaviour in this case study.

This chapter will analyse Sean Spicer's political performance through the theories of habitus and disciplined bodies, as well as Spicer's bastardisation of the use of the political communicative device of spin. The chapter will then analyse how Sean Spicer's political performance affects the reportage of press briefings, and how interpretative journalism containing subjective commentary and analysis is favoured to report on the Spicer press briefings instead of traditional, objective reporting. In total, 74 per cent of the news articles in the sample contained subjective comment, and often factual corrections on Sean Spicer's claims. It should be noted that subjective commentary and objective reportage can occur in an article simultaneously, with 60 per cent of the news articles containing objective reportage in the first three paragraphs of the article.

## 5.1 Theories of Political Performance

### 5.1.1 (Un)Disciplined Bodies

In mediated political communication, journalists' and political actors' bodies and how they have performed embodied communication is often not given significant consideration (Craig, 2016). Embodied communication involves not only bodily deportment but also having a mastery over one's voice and gestures (Craig, 2016). Spicer's embodied communicative activities can be analysed akin to how a drama student can analyse an actor's performance in a play. While it is not out of the ordinary for news media to quote press secretaries in regards to policy articles and the President's activities, it is not the norm for news articles to comment on a Press secretary's tone of voice, gestures, and body language during a press briefing, it is also uncommon to report on their interpersonal

interactions with journalists that occur during the briefing, and supply a written description of how the press secretary is behaving.

There is an interesting pattern that reoccurs in the news articles, that reveals the media organisations' discourse. The new articles repeatedly comment on Spicer's political performance and his reactions to the journalists in the press briefing. For example, speech presentation is a heavily utilised discourse tool to analyse the reportage of Sean Spicer. While *ABC News* neutrally referred to the incident when Sean Spicer told April Ryan to 'stop shaking her head' as an 'exchange', and *NBC News* and *The New York Post* went slightly further to refer to the moment as 'a heated exchange.' Many media outlets in the sample used descriptive words to inform the reader of Spicer's agency and aggression in his political performance. *The Associated Press* refers to April Ryan in an article as a report "who was scolded by White House Press secretary Sean Spicer to stop shaking her head in response to one of his answers at a press briefing." The choice to use the word scolded can be seen as discourse driven decision to reinforce the discourse that the press is under attack from the Trump administration. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines 'scolded' as 'to censure severely or angrily'. This speech presentation informs the reader of the article that Spicer's behaviour was aggressive and unrestrained and outside the realm of expected behaviours that a Press secretary would exhibit in a press briefing. The speech presentation also informs on the discourse of power dynamics. By using the word 'scolded' *The Associated Press* is suggesting that Spicer believes to hold power over April Ryan and the other members of the White House Press corps. Sean Spicer is in the Press Briefing Room acting as the representative to President Trump, his power is legitimised by this association, and therefore what Sean Spicer says to the reporters is what President Trump is speaking to his constituents and the global audience through the intercessors of the print, digital, and broadcast media. *The Associated Press* is not the only media organisation to use speech presentation to convey this power relation. *National Public Radio* reported that "Spicer lectured (own emphasis) veteran reporter April Ryan." *The New York Times* claimed that Spicer "had cut off her question to chastise her for what he deemed an inappropriate shake of the head". This statement is situated in the lead paragraph of the article entitled "For April Ryan, Clashes with the White House Brings a New Kind of Prominence". Choosing to inform the reader that Spicer interrupted Ryan to chastise her emphasises that Spicer was

not performing in a way that is expected from the Press secretary. Spicer denied Ryan the right to both finish her question and for having a personal opinion. Moreover, Spicer also refused the dialogical nature of the press briefing by criticising Ryan for shaking her head.

A key part of what makes the press briefing a dialogical communicative encounter is the follow-up question (Schubert, 2012). It can be expected that journalists will raise their hands and shout out follow-up questions over-top of one another. If a press corps member has exceeded their right to ask follow-up questions and seek clarification, another member of the Press corps may choose to take on the line of questioning (Schubert, 2012). This is an excellent illustration to the metaphor of wolf pack and prey that is offered by Partington (2003). The White House press corps is the wolf pack that hunts together to seek out the information it needs to survive; the press secretary is the sole prey that provides the information. This metaphor will be discussed in-depth in the following chapter. In the encounter of the White House press briefing journalists are expected to discipline their bodies as per the expectations of the communicative genre. It is not expected that in a press briefing a journalist would overtly accuse the Press secretary of lying during the press briefing. Spicer could have construed April Ryan shaking her head back and forth as an accusation of lying or a disagreement in what he was saying, by his response of ‘I appreciate your agenda’.

In the press briefing #30 Case Study, *The New York Daily News* was the most critical of Sean Spicer’s political performance during his exchanged with April Ryan. Journalist, Leonard Greene contextualises the encounter between Sean Spicer and April Ryan into the social landscape of the United States of America and another recent political communication event. The article’s headline “Sean Spicer and Bill O’Reilly continue the age-old American Tradition of disrespecting black women.” The article compares Sean Spicer’s chastising with April Ryan to Fox News personality, Bill O’Reilly claiming that 70-year-old Congresswoman Maxine Water’s hair looked like a wig and was distracting O’Reilly from what she was saying. *The New York Daily News* reported that Spicer “tore into reporter April Ryan for having the audacity to challenge his interpretation of facts at a news conference.” This informs the reader that Spicer was acting towards Ryan in a way that was unacceptable and demeaning. The final paragraph of the article condemns not only Spicer's political

performance but also his apparent lack of awareness that he was misbehaving, *The New York Daily News* states that Spicer was "yet to say sorry for talk to Ryan like he was her daddy."

### 5.1.2 Habitus

These interactions between Spicer and the White House press corps can further be analysed through a theory of subjectivity, habitus. Habitus seeks to account for the struggle between structure and agency, the weight of the past is internalised and embodied in behaviour and characterisations to inform on the political communicative encounter. Habitus suggests that individuals are a product of their upbringing, values systems, professional background and social structures which manifests in the manner of how they speak, present themselves and interact with others (Bourdieu, 2002). These modes of personal style and experience cumulatively inform repertoires of political actions and modes of relating that are integral to political success (Craig, 2016).

The analysis below of Sean Spicer's habitus has been constructed with the aid of multiple sources, in order to best capture the multi-layered complexities that makes habitus a fascinating concept to consider in political communication. This analysis references media profiles from *The New York Times* and *ABC News*, as well as his official biography on the Republican National Committee website.

*The New York Times* (2017) profile focuses not only on his education and professional background, but it also describes his physical appearance as 'stocky' and notes that President Trump had instructed him to dress in 'smarter suits' after the first press briefing, that is one of the case studies for this thesis. The profile also describes Spicer's behaviour during the half-hour interview stating that he 'ate soft-serve ice cream from a cup branded with the presidential seal- was by turns defensive and relaxed, and still excited by the novelty of working in the West Wing,'. From the reportage of the initial press briefing, this description of Spicer's behaviour reinforces his defensive nature. Furthermore, by highlighting the fact he was eating soft-serve ice cream from a presidential seal branded cup in his office while being interviewed it suggests to the reader that Spicer is an individual that

does not let convention be an obstacle, whether in his capacity as press secretary or satisfying his sweet tooth.

Both *ABC News* (2017) and *The New York Times* (2017) note that Spicer is from Barrington, Rhode Island in the United States and grew up in a middle-class family. Spicer prides himself on being persistent and a fighter, when he first began working on political campaigns after university, he lived in a motorhome without heating nor hot water. Sean Spicer should be seen as well educated, as he attended a prestigious Roman Catholic Boarding School on a scholarship which he applied for without his parents' knowledge and graduated in 1989. Spicer then went on to graduate from Connecticut College in 1993 and joined the Navy six years later. He also holds a master's degree in military strategy from the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. Spicer still serves as a Navy Reserve.

It could be surmised that Spicer's stiffness in his bodily deportment derives from his Naval background, as armed servicemen are required to deport themselves in a regimented manner. His Navy service could also explain his inability to engage in dialogical encounters with journalists, it is likely that he is used to giving and receiving orders that are not to be negotiated or questioned, whereas, questioning is an inherent part of being a journalist. Being a press secretary requires wit and fluidity, in other words one must be able to think on their feet, keep reporters under control, be engaging and get them to understand and disseminate the Administration's message. Spicer did not possess this communicative flexibility and competence.

Being cognisant of Sean Spicer's prestigious and highly accomplished education, as well as his history in the Armed Services, it becomes even more mind-boggling that Spicer would attempt to claim that unlike Bashar al-Assad, Adolf Hitler did not use chemical weapons on his own people. As pointed out by *The New York Daily News* 'He clearly forgot about millions gassed in death camps', further pointing out later in the article that Hitler had become synonymous with the term gas chambers'. During the Holocaust, more than six million Jewish people were murdered using this method along with others, as well as a significant number of Romany, Homosexual people, and political dissidents under Hitler's instruction. As World War II is considered a pivotal event in Modern Western History, *The New York*

*Daily News* suggests that to claim Hitler did not use chemical weapons on innocent people is to deny the Holocaust, the most dangerous form of Fake News. To compound the insult, these comments were made on the first day of Passover, the Holiest of days in the Jewish Faith. As a practising Catholic, he would have known that the Passover was being celebrated. The Passover is referenced in the Bible (sacred text of the Catholic Church) four times. Specifically, in the book of Matthew, in chapter 26, Jesus informs his disciples that he is to be crucified only days after the Passover, and the Last Supper of Jesus and his Disciples was the Passover meal (Matthew 26: 17-19, NKJV).

Spicer's career history makes his newsworthy mistakes as press secretary even more baffling. Before becoming press secretary, Sean Spicer was the Communications Director and Chief Strategist of the Republican National Committee. During his tenure, Spicer revived the Republicans' tarnished brand and built an award-winning press and research team. He had also served as Assistant United States Trade Representative for Media and Public Affairs in the George W. Bush Administration. From May 2005 to 2006, Spicer was the Communications Director for the House Republican Conference. In this role, he provided media training for members of Congress and 220 press secretaries (GOP.org, n.d.). This makes Spicer's following of Trump's ire towards the media even more surprising as his initial press briefing diatribe did not suggest he had over a decade's experience in political communications.

Spicer's knowledge and experience not translating in his political performance could have been affected by Spicer's lack of personal agency, as discussed in detail in the literature review (Towle, 1997) and the next chapter. The press secretary serves at the pleasure of the President and is their mouthpiece, when Spicer first went in front of the press corps for his initial press briefing Spicer could not utilise his media relations knowledge that he had acquired through his experiences at the Republican National Committee and the Republican House Conference as President Trump directed him to scold the media after the President had already criticised the media on Twitter. However, his aggressive behaviour was repeated in press briefing #30 and press briefing #36 suggests that he did not have the skill to perform this high profile position. An accurate simile would be to say that Spicer's performance as Press secretary was like a fresh university graduate,



armed with the knowledge of a Bachelor's degree but without the life experience to perform such a high profile position.

## 5.2 There is Spin, and then there is Spicer

A study into political journalism and democracy cannot ignore the role of public relations in the production of political journalism (McNair, 2000). Downes (1998) defines a Press secretary as a communication manager that frames issues in a manner most suitable to the politician they represent. A communications manager is a synonym for a public relations professional (Mersham, Theunissen & Peart, 2009). In his survey of Congressional Press Secretaries, Downes (1998) found that the majority of his respondents believed that spin was framing issues that showed their bosses most favourably. According to Craig (2013), the term spin has existed in political discourse from the 1950s and supposedly derives from using persuasive strategies and creative engagement with the truth, as emulated in the phrase 'to spin a yarn'. McNair (2000) believes that the rise of spin is a reflection on the fact that in an expanded information market, and the need for journalists to create a unique angle on a story, any story (even the press briefing) can become newsworthy and thus detrimental in terms of publicity. Craig (2013) also believes that the explosive growth of governmental and political forms of strategic communication is due to a broader social and cultural promotional environment, moreover as jobs in journalism have decreased as newsrooms are converged spin is more often able to occur undetected when it is performed in a covert manner (McNair, 2000).

It can be said that Sean Spicer's attempt to spin the crowd size of the inauguration during the press briefing was unsuccessful due to the public nature of Spicer's job title as the White House Press secretary to the President of the United States. Spicer's attempt at spinning the inauguration crowd size was not covert and deliberate, but overt and impromptu, in front of an audience of people whom he was accusing to be liars. Spicer is proof to Craig's (2013) assertion that it is harder for the White House Press secretary to successfully spin than it is for press secretaries in other countries such as the United Kingdom as The White House Press secretary is a formal public role. The Congressional press secretaries in Downes' (1997) study claimed that in order to be a successful press secretary one must not lie to the

press as the press will discover that they have lied and it will ruin their credibility. It can be argued that this warning given by the anonymous congressional press secretary should be heeded more seriously in this era of web 2.0, as due to the computing ability of smartphones, journalists can fact check what the press secretary is saying, almost as soon as they have said it.

It is this ability to fact check that made Spicer's claims about the inauguration crowd size, so ridiculous and therefore newsworthy. As recorded in *The New York Times* article from the sample "among other easily debunked assertions, Mr Spicer falsely claimed that Mr Trump's inauguration was the most attended in history (photographs indicated it was not)." *The Hill* also points out that Nielsen ratings show the number of people who watched Trump's inauguration on television was significantly less the first term inaugurations of former presidents Obama and Reagan. *The Wall Street Journal* highlights that the statistics that Spicer used to spin that Trump's inauguration had 'the largest audience ever' were ridership statistics from Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority in comparison to President Barack Obama's 2013 inauguration (his second term). One could argue that the reason why the 2013 Inauguration had a smaller number of people attend the inauguration was that it was President Obama's second term as President, and therefore not as historic.

A press secretary from history that is comparable to Sean Spicer is President Richard Nixon's Press secretary, Ronald Louis Ziegler. Like Spicer, Ziegler had a lack of journalism experience (Towle, 1997). Like Trump, Nixon famously had low regard for the press. He believed that the press overtly favoured John F. Kennedy during Nixon's first Presidential bid (Towle, 1997). Ziegler was the President's press secretary during the time of the Watergate Scandal. Nixon did not wish for Ziegler to elaborate or interpret for the administration. The press was dissatisfied with Ziegler's inability to release information, and as noted by Towle (1997, p. 308) 'His reputation for obfuscation was such that the Washington press corps coined a verb "to zeigle": the action the press secretary took when he gave an answer to a question without answering the question.' Much like Trump administration spokesperson and former election campaign manager, Kellyanne Conway claiming that Spicer was not lying about the Inauguration crowd size but was rather providing 'alternative facts' (*Wall Street Journal*,

2017). On Twitter #alternativefacts, then began to trend and entered into the everyday vernacular on the internet.

Spicer attempted double spin per se that his claims were not inaccurate by citing that there are no official numbers for the inauguration crowd, as the National Parks Service, which presides over the National Mall where the inauguration spectators stand, does not make the official crowd count public. As the press secretary is the intercessor between the President and the White House Press corps, Spicer's job is to reiterate and clarify the President's statements (and tweets). However, it is not logical for a President who lost the popular vote and rests on the laurels of the Electoral College to garner the largest crowd for a Presidential Inauguration in history. Spicer's attack on the media is reminiscent of Trump's Twitter habits during the election campaign. Trump repeatedly attacked the media for publically underestimating him as a serious candidate. It is fair to say that Spicer's attempt at spinning the crowd size was under the instruction of President Trump and not on his own volition. Although inaugurations make a president a president, great crowds at an inauguration do not make for a great president. A great president is made by responding to crises with aid and compassion, caretaking a stable economy, and the understanding that they serve for the benefit of the American people. A great president does not serve for the benefit of themselves. A great president's leadership emulates the sentiment expressed in Psalm 31: 8-9, 'Speak up for those who can't speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.' The White House press corps has to ensure that the President is held to account so that the president can be the great president that the United States deserves.

### 5.3 How Spicer's political performance informs on the reportage

When reporting on political communicative events, there are two styles of reportage which a media outlet may choose between. In the past decades, political commentary has enjoyed a remarkable expansion in the media landscape. Media theorist Brian McNair (2000), refers to this phenomenon the *Interpretative moment* (original emphasis). The interpretative moment favours reporting an evaluation or opinion about a number of factors including the

substance, style, and the process of political affairs over the straight reportage of new information. Market-orientated journalism tends to favour subjective commentary over objective fact-reporting as it differentiates media outlets from one another to be more attractive to consumers (McNair, 2000). It is important to note that subjective commentary and objective fact reporting can occur simultaneously in an article.

An example of subjective commentary and objective fact reportage used to report on the same story is best showcased through the articles from *The New York Daily News* and *The New York Times* concerning the press briefing #30 case study. It is through the reporting of the April Ryan Confrontation that *The New York Post's* right-wing ideology becomes apparent. Through a content analysis, it is apparent that the article does not contain subjective commentary. It neither directly criticises Spicer nor Ryan. The article's lead announces that April Ryan was the first person to get to ask a question, after she was 'told by presidential spokesman Sean Spicer to "stop shaking your head" during a heated exchange.' By referring to the interaction as a 'heated exchange' the moment is sanitised and does not suggest that one person is at fault over another. The article is only seven paragraphs long as does not seek to editorialise upon Spicer's actions, instead it merely states that "Spicer accused Ryan of pressing an agenda." This causes Spicer's political performance and jeremiad towards Ryan to seem justified.

As previously mentioned, *The New York Daily News*, however, goes to great lengths to portray Sean Spicer's political performance and behaviour towards April Ryan as unjustified. According to the content analysis, *The New York Daily News* article displays no objective commentary and criticises Spicer's actions by contextualising them into the United States' rampant systemic racism problem. Sean Spicer's political performance caused *The New York Daily News* to analyse the power relations that manifest in this interaction through the discourses of race and power. Reporter April Ryan is an African American single mother, and Sean Spicer is a Caucasian American married father. April Ryan is the White House Correspondent for American Urban Radio Networks, a collection of radio stations that exist to service the African American market specifically. *The New York Daily News* utilises metaphors to explain how Spicer exerts his power over Ryan. In paragraph six, *The New York Daily News* describes Spicer's lecture at Ryan to be in the manner of if "she were a petulant

child arguing over her bedtime.” *The New York Daily News* refers to this lecture as “one of his (Spicer’s) most patronising moments behind the podium, scolding Ryan from shaking her head in disagreement while he was trying to make a point” (*The New York Daily News*, 2017). The article then goes further to point out, that this was the second time during the Trump administration that April Ryan had made headlines for being publically disrespected. A few weeks previous to Spicer’s lecture, Ryan asks President Trump if he was going to meet with the congressional African American and Hispanic caucuses. *The New York Daily News* interpreted that President Trump mistook April Ryan for “hired help”, as he asks "Do you want to set up the meeting? Are they friends of yours?" This alludes back to the United States’ history of African people forcibly being brought into the United States to be shackled as slaves. Even after slavery was abolished in 1865, African Americans were treated as second-class citizens and hired to work in the homes of white families and raise their children. Although the Civil Rights Act awarded the universal rights and privileges for people of all races and ending segregation in 1964, racist attitudes are still present today and often manifested in communicative exchanges like the one between Trump and Ryan.

#### 5.4 Conclusion

In sum, political communication is a multi-faceted phenomenon that takes into account an individual’s habitus, which is the combination of one’s value systems, educational and professional background, the manner in which they present themselves, both in dress and in speech. What is interesting about how Sean Spicer’s habitus relates to his political performance and his headline-making mistakes is that he ought to have known that his behaviour was inappropriate and could cause offence.

In the first case study, when Sean Spicer launched a diatribe towards the White House Press corps for supposedly misrepresenting the crowd size of President Trump’s Inauguration and using misleading statistics himself, his professional background should have given him a premonition of the backlash that he would receive. As previously mentioned, before Sean Spicer became the White House press secretary, he was the Director of Communications and Strategy for the Republican National Committee, and he created the media relations

training programme for the members of Congress and their Press Secretaries as Communication Director of the House Republican Committee.

In the second case study, the same points about his habitus suggesting he should not have behaved with illegitimate aggression also applies. He should have known to respond calmly to April Ryan's question about whether the White House had an image problem over the alleged collusion with the Russian government and President Trump alleging that President Obama wiretapped the Trump Tower during the election campaign in 2016. This moment could have avoided the news agenda if he had simply said something to the effect of "these issues will run their course", or "By focusing on our policies and Making America Great Again". Instead, Spicer chose to personally attack a correspondent and talk down to her as if she was his own child, not a journalist with years of experience reporting on the White House.

In the third case study, it was seen as ridiculous and insensitive for Sean Spicer to claim that Adolf Hitler did not use chemical weapons on his own people and was thus worse as Hitler, on the first day of Passover. Adolf Hitler was the architect for the Holocaust which saw the death of six million Jews in gas chambers, or as Spicer referred to them as 'Holocaust Centres' which was deemed by many people to express that Spicer was trying to "Sanitise the Holocaust". Sean Spicer should have realised that he would offend Jews and Gentiles alike as Adolf Hitler is considered synonymous with the gas chamber and as a devout Christian, the Passover was an important time in the story of Jesus as it was when he was captured and crucified. Moreover, as someone that has worked as an Armed Serviceman, one would assume that Sean Spicer would have knowledge of what happened during one of the largest wars of the previous century.

All of these incidents made headlines not just in the United States, but in countries such as New Zealand because Sean Spicer lacked the subtlety that spin requires. As previously mentioned, Craig (2013) points out that spin is most effective when it is unseen, and the public is unaware that they are being manipulated. The role of the White House Press secretary is a highly publicised formal role, as Press Briefings can often be recorded both in video and audio and broadcasted on television and the radio. Spicer's aggression when it

came to his attempt at spin did not have a foundation of truth and lacked a degree of charm to carry off the spin successfully.

This aggression and unusual behaviours caused an unusual change in reporting on the Press Briefings. Instead of reporting on the policy content of the Press Briefing many media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Hill*, and *NBC News* reported on Sean Spicer's diatribes and ridiculous claims and their veracity. This led to the sample containing more subjective commentary than objective reporting. In market-orientated journalism, subjective commentary in columns and editorials are often favoured as they allow for the publication or broadcast outlet to market their columnists as unique selling points. This does however further threaten what McNair (2000) refers to as a punditocracy, and supposedly causes citizens to stop thinking for themselves.

## 6. Political Source Relations: Spicer and the White House Press corps

The following chapter will analyse the relationship between Press secretary Sean Spicer and the White House press corps, and how the relationship is manifested in the reportage through third party source quotes. Sean Spicer acts as the political source for the White House Press corps, as a political operative and surrogate to the President. As stated in Chapter Two, the relationship between a political source is both co-dependent and symbiotic (Downes, 1998). Without the press secretary, American political journalism would be based on rumour and gossip (Sanders, 2009). The White House press corps was also defined in Chapter Two as a group of journalists that are assigned to cover the White House, in respect to both policy decisions and events such as press conferences or briefings. These journalists work for newspapers, magazines, wire services, radio stations, television stations and cable news networks in the United States and other international territories (Sanders, 2009). First this chapter will analyse how Spicer's relationship with the Press corps became so contentious through the case study press briefings, as this enables understanding of how Sean Spicer became the news himself. Following this, the chapter will then evaluate if the coverage of Sean Spicer distracted media consumers from critical political developments and policy decisions that would impact their lives. This evaluation will be completed by analysing the press briefing transcripts of the initial press briefing, press briefing #30 (April Ryan confrontation), and press briefing #36 (Assad/Hitler comparison). As the transcript is a complete unedited account of the press briefings, they act as excellent source material to contextualise the irate soundbites that became the international news headlines. Further building on this, this chapter will analyse how the ideology of the newspapers and the fractured relationship with Spicer is expressed through source quotes, either condemning Sean Spicer for his comments and actions during the press briefings or defending his actions and comments. This chapter will analyse the source quotes from news stories by *The New York Times*, *Fox News*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *CNN*, *The Associated Press*, *Reuters*. All six of these media organisations are considered prestigious media outlets that have a heavily influence on the mediated public sphere and propagate different ideologies throughout the spectrum. The newspaper *The New York Times* and Cable News Channel *CNN* both propagate the liberal ideology. The newspaper *The Wall Street Journal* and Cable News



Channel *Fox News* both propagate the conservative ideology. Both *The Associated Press* and *Reuters* are newswire agencies and therefore they are tasked with publishing non-biased news content that other media organisations can purchase. From this, the chapter will explore how the reporting from The White Press corps affects the American Mediated Public Sphere. As discussed in previous chapters, many citizens only engaged in politics through a mediated context, whether through traditional media or social media. This often causes personality to take precedence over policy and therefore is not an arena of rational political argument.

### 6.1 The Relationship between Sean Spicer and the White House Press corps?

President Trump declared at the beginning of his Presidency that he was in “a running war with the media” (*New York Times*, 2017). To expand on that metaphor, if Trump is in a war with the media, then Spicer is his General leading the attack. Spicer began his relationship with the Press corps true to this metaphor, with a condescending rant about how reporters had misrepresented the Presidency with ‘irresponsible and reckless’ reporting by claiming that the President had a bust of civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. removed from the White House (*Fox News*, 2017). Spicer then enacted ridership data from the Washington Metro System to claim that Trump’s inauguration had the largest audience witnessing the proceedings both in person and around the world.

It is not only Spicer's combative nature that made the initial press briefing a headline in the news media (with 89 per cent of the sample articles recording Spicer’s illegitimate behaviour) but also his hypocrisy when it came to presenting the facts. After criticising the media for dangerously and recklessly presenting an argument without having all the facts, Spicer then did the exact actions of what he accused the press of doing. This undermines Spicer’s credibility with the press corps. Eighty-two per cent of this case study’s sample articles contained subjective comments, some of them alluding to Spicer’s hypocrisy. According to Towle (1997), it is not civility that makes a Press secretary successful, but whether the Press secretary is viewed as credible and knowledgeable to have the respect of the press and the President. Reporters are more willing to take the words of a respected

Press secretary at face value. In practice, *The New York Times* quoted Ben Smith, the Editor in Chief of *Buzzfeed*, and Lynn Sweet, a political reporter for *The Chicago Sun-Times*, both journalism professionals state that civility is not an essential attribute to a press secretary, but instead honesty is. Ben Smith is quoted in *The New York Times* (2017) saying “I think they’ll find in moments of real crisis, rather than political theatre, that they need to win back the credibility they are spending now.”

During Press Briefing #30 Spicer’s linguistic choices reveal the tense relationship between himself and the Press corps. From the transcript of the Press Briefing, Press corps member April Ryan states “Sean, you don’t seem happy.” This statement comes after questions asked by Press corps members that reveal the ideology clash between the Trump administration and the Press corps. An example of such questions shown in the transcript was “Okay. Interpret something else for me: Does the President still believe that climate change is a hoax?” The opening of this question “Okay. Interpret something else for me” is a direct challenge to Spicer in response to Spicer accusing the journalist “you’re asking me how to interpret that in any other way than literally reading plain English.” The transcript shows that there is a struggle for power between Spicer and the journalist. As previously mentioned, in the discourse of the press briefing, Spicer ideally would have a level control of the proceedings by selecting which journalist can ask him a question and he should have the respect of the Press corps as the surrogate to the President. However, once question time begins, Spicer may be asked questions by journalists that he was not expecting to be on the agenda (Craig, 2016). This was certainly the case during Press Briefing #30. Spicer was refuting claims made by *The Washington Post*, that the Trump administration was attempting to block Former Attorney General Sally Yates from testifying in the Muller probe and that the Administration’s statements on the matter clearly outlined that they were not, in fact, trying to block Yates from testifying and could not be interpreted any other way. Spicer declared that *The Washington Post* story was “100 per cent false” (The White House, 2017b). When the unidentified member of the Press corps segued into the question about the President's beliefs on climate change, Spicer was caught off guard and stated that the President believed that climate change initiatives and job creation were not binary choices.

According to Craig (2016, pp.97-98), the topic of the press briefing can often heighten the drama and can trigger moments of conflict between the Press secretary and the Press corps. This thesis asserts that it was the topic of whether President Trump 'still' believed that climate change was 'a hoax' was the topic that heightens the drama of the Press Briefing. The word 'still' implies an implicit bias that the journalist holds against Trump and his administration. Donald Trump has repeatedly tweeted that he does not believe that climate change (also known as global warming), one specific tweet that highlights this belief reads: "NBC News called it the great freeze- coldest weather in years. Is our country still spending money on the GLOBAL WARMING HOAX!" (Trump, D. J. [@realDonaldTrump], 2014, original emphasis). The journalist, therefore, believes that the climate change is a genuine problem burdening the planet and perhaps is implying that Trump is not fit to be the President if he is ignoring critical environmental issues. It is clear that the main topic of conflict was whether the Administration had an image problem. This topic resulted in April Ryan shaking her head in disbelief and Sean Spicer commanding Ryan to cease shaking her head. Essentially, what Sean Spicer was doing in this situation was denying April Ryan her personal agency. *The New York Daily News* referred to Spicer as an 'equal opportunity offender'. This means that the journalist believes that Sean Spicer would insult and inappropriately instruct any member of the White House Press corps, despite the colour of their skin, their gender identity, or their religion.

Spicer's contentious and illegitimate behaviour during this press briefing has the highest percentage of recorded illegitimate aggressive behaviour. Ninety-five per cent of the sample articles (20 out of 21 case study articles) report that Spicer exhibited illegitimate aggressive behaviour towards April Ryan in the first three paragraphs, however the press briefing transcripts show Ryan was not the only victim of Spicer's aggression, other journalists such as the one asking questions about climate change also received aggressive answers from Spicer. The journalist discourse analysis of source quotes which is explained below analyses the entirety of the articles, not just the first three paragraphs. It is evident that although only 62 per cent of the sample articles in this case study contained subjective comment in the first three paragraphs, criticisms of Spicer's behaviour are still present and feature more strongly in the later paragraphs of the articles. This is because the first few paragraphs of

the articles are contextualising the press briefing and the nature of the press secretary/press corps relationship to the lay person media consumer.

It is fair for Ryan to suggest that the Administration was experiencing an image problem. After two months in office, the administration was under investigation by multiple government agencies for different reasons, such as colluding with Russian officials. President Trump also accused the Obama Administration of 'wiretapping' Trump Tower during the 2016 Election Campaign. Spicer maintained that there was no connection between Russia and Trump. Spicer also incorrectly asserted that the Administration does not have an image problem because it is the media's agenda to push false stories. The reason why Spicer was incorrect in saying this is an organisation's image (whether a corporation or a government administration), is reliant on the opinions of individuals outside of the organisation, and these opinions are usually formed by what individuals consume in the media (Mersham, Theunissen & Peart, 2009). Therefore, it is justified that Ryan might shake her head in disbelief. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Spicer has held the position of Communications Director at both the Republican National Committee and the Republican House Conference (GOP.org, n.d.).

It is also interesting to note that despite Sean Spicer resigning from the Trump administration in July 2017, in March 2018 he will still publically criticising members of the press corps. For example, on *Hannity*, a Fox News programme, Spicer referred to *CNN* Correspondent Jim Acosta as "carnival barker in the press room" as well as "clueless and classless". Furthermore, Spicer dramatically shouted on *Hannity*, that Acosta's press briefing questions were nothing but 'dramatic shouting' so it is justified for his replacement Press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders to not call on him to ask a question for three consecutive press briefings. An important factor to consider when analysing the relationship between the White House press secretary to the press corps, is what is the sitting president's opinion on the media. President Trump considers himself to be in a 'running war' with the media. Therefore, it is not logical to think that the White House press corps' relationship to the Press secretary would dramatically improve as a new person stepped into the role. Before Sanders replaced Spicer as press secretary, she was his deputy and

took press briefings when Spicer was on Naval Reserve Duties. Thus her relationship with the press corps was already formed.

## 6.2 Policy versus Process: Are these interrogative exchanges a distraction?

It must be acknowledged that coverage of the political process does have merit in the mediated political public sphere. It is not the aim of this thesis to claim that it has no merit and is not worth being reported. McNair (2000) argues that policy and process are not separate discourses but instead work together to construct a whole picture. Reportage of process can aid citizens in detecting the influence that politicians and their press secretaries may exert over their attitudes and behaviour (McNair, 2000). This is important as civic education is sorely lacking in school curricula. Citizens must be aware of how messages are spun and how news is manufactured, however from the initial data gathering for this thesis, it was clear that process reporting and reporting on the communication events of the White House press briefing superseded in articles regarding policy decisions. The Electoral College saw the election of President Trump; press secretary is not a voted office. However, press secretaries must be held accountable for how they represent the President and how they behave as public servants, as their salary is funded via taxes. However, it is their job to deliver the news, in the most effective way that benefits the administration. Sean Spicer nevertheless became the news headline on many occasions. A study conducted by The Pew Research Center (2017) found that during the first one hundred days of the Trump administration, media outlets that propagate ideologies from throughout the political spectrum framed their coverage around character and leadership as opposed to policy. The results of the content analysis back up The Pew Research Centre's (2017) claims. Spicer is first quoted in 82 per cent of the sample articles and therefore is the main focus of the article. He is not a source of information like he would be if these articles were about political policy decisions. In the content analysis, 74 per cent of the total sample contains subjective commentary in the first three paragraphs, these subjective comments mainly regard opinions on Spicer's role in the political process opposed to Spicer's comments on policy matters.

As previously mentioned, the top story that came out of Press Briefing #30, was Sean Spicer instructing April Ryan to 'Stop shaking her head'. However, he also informed the White House Press corps on policy topics such as the President signing an Executive Order on energy independence at the Environmental Protection Agency, as well as more information about reinstating the Dakota Access Pipeline, which President Obama had previously shut down. The reporting of Sean Spicer instructing April Ryan to stop shaking her head provides evidence for the critique that the reporting of every small, precise, detail of what happens in politics is distracting from policy decisions (McNair, 2000). The Dakota Access Pipeline is not just an important environmental issue but an indigenous rights issue. Native American Sioux Tribe from the Standing Rock Reservation argued that the Dakota Access Pipeline would contaminate their drinking water and desecrate their sacred burial sites. President Obama suspended the production on the Dakota Access Pipeline as the Sioux Tribe protested for months and received international support. Many Facebook users from around the globe 'checked-in' at Standing Rock Reservation to show solidarity and in New Zealand, a group of Maori performed a Haka in front of the US embassy to show that they supported the Sioux Tribe in their protest. One could suggest that Spicer's outburst was to distract from the Administration's disregard for Native Sovereignty, as well as an attempt to discredit the notion that the Trump Election Campaign and Russian Officials colluded to ensure that Hillary Clinton did not become the President of the United States.

In Press Briefing #36, Spicer claiming that Bashar al-Assad was more morally corrupted than 'someone as despicable as Hitler' became the leading story of many news outlets and was featured in 97 per cent (29 out of 30) of the sample articles. Other topics that Spicer and Press corps discussed included repealing the Affordable Care Act, foreign relations with China and North Korea, and if United Airlines were to be investigated by the White House. All of these topics had been discussed heavily in the then-current news agenda. By Spicer claiming "we didn't use chemical weapons in World War II", thus inadvertently denying the Holocaust, the media outlets in the sample all ignore the fact that Spicer referred to North Korea, Syria, and Iran as 'failed states'. Spicer also claims that it is the goal of the United States to destabilise the conflict that was happening in Syria, not to repatriate Syrians into American Society because that is not a permanent solution to ending the conflict. This was a hot-button issue during the current news cycle globally, not just in the United States, as

citizens were pressuring their representatives to increase the number of refugees that came into the country, and the Trump administration was attempting to ban people with passports from Middle Eastern countries, such as Syria from traveling into the United States.

From the transcript, it is apparent that Spicer's primary goal was to criticise Russia for aligning themselves with Syria. As the question that was asked by the Press corps member was

“The alliance between Russia and Syria is a strong one; it goes back decades. President Putin has supplied personnel and he's supplied military equipment to the Assad government. What makes you think that at this point he is going to pull back in his support for President Assad and for the Syrian government right now?”

Spicer began his answer with the infamous soundbite, “we didn’t use chemical weapons in World War II. You had someone as despicable as Hitler who didn’t even sink to using chemical weapons. So you have to, if you’re Russia, ask yourself is this a country that you and a regime that you want to align yourself with?”

By leading with this false statement, Spicer’s real answer and justification are overshadowed. “You (Russia) have previously signed on to international agreements rightfully acknowledging that the use of chemicals weapons should be out of bounds by every country. To not stand up to Assad but to your own word, should be troubling.” Perhaps if Spicer had not previously made so many erroneous claims, the media would have reported about the international relations elements of the press briefing, rather than his comparison between Assad and Hitler, as that was only a diminutive part of his response but was the most absurd. This will be analysed in depth in the proceeding chapter.

It is important to note that this is not the first time the American Government and the Media have compared a World Leader to Hitler in an effort to gain public consensus. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky (2002, p. 265) point out that the discourse around Pol Pot and the genocide in Cambodia had ‘forged new patterns of Genocide comparable to Hitler and Stalin.’ However, once the Vietnamese removed Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge from power, the discourse around Pol Pot changed from evil dictator to a character of sympathy. The Vietnamese were the number one political enemy of the United

States, therefore, the Administration was attempting to score political points at home to keep the population in support of their war effort. By focusing on the process of Spicer's words and his attempt to justify his misstep, important policy decisions were overlooked and not discussed in the public sphere.

### 6.3 Ideology expressed through source quotes selection

Third party sources provide comments and opinions that help to shape the tone and ideological expression of a news story. The following is an analysis of what quotes that could be in defence of Spicer, or condemning Spicer mean in the context of the whole article in order to propagate the media organisation's ideology.

#### 6.3.1 The initial press briefing

*The New York Times* first third party source quote is from the president of the White House Correspondents' Association, Jeff Mason. Mason is quoted telling *CNN* (another liberal media organisation) that Spicer's actions during the initial press briefing were "stunning and shocking". Elaborating in a phone interview with *The New York Times*, Mason stated "People were surprised. I was surprised. It's not what I was expecting for the first statement by the press secretary in the press room." This shows to the reader that Spicer's behaviour is outside of what is expected for a press secretary. Mason is a credible source, as his leadership position in the White House Correspondents Association would suggest that he has been a member of the Press corps for a considerable length of time. The article then moves on to discuss Kellyanne Conway's appearance on NBC's *Meet the Press*. Conway works alongside Spicer in the Trump administration as a "Counselor to the President". On *Meet the Press* Conway asserted that Spicer "merely presented alternative facts" The host of *Meet the Press*, Chuck Todd rebutted her in saying "Look, alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods." This reinforces the idea of article, that if Spicer continues his behaviour of this initial press briefing it will be damaging to democracy. Conway then threatens Todd by stating "If we are going to keep referring to our press secretary in those types of terms, I think that we are going to have to rethink our relationship." By including this comment *The New York Times* reinforces that this contentious relationship extends further than Spicer to



the entire Trump administration. *The New York Times*, then quotes *Buzzfeed's* Editor in chief, Ben Smith claiming that the Trump administration would “find practical reasons to be honest... they need to win back the creditability that they are spending now.” This statement suggests that Spicer is acting against his own self-interest, and will need to change his behaviour soon. *The New York Times* also refers to former press secretary Ari Fleischer, who expresses empathy towards Spicer. Fleischer was the Press secretary for President George W. Bush (The 43<sup>rd</sup> President), Spicer had also worked in the Bush 43 administration alongside him. Fleischer notes that Spicer’s behaviour was a break from tradition and that “Everyone complains about the press, but most people bite their tongues.” Fleischer further explains Spicer’s job as Press secretary by telling *The New York Times* “Sean’s first client is the President of the United States and those around the president; his second client is the press corps, and he has to serve both, always guided by truth.” This highlights where Spicer’s priorities lie, however Fleischer is also acknowledging the need for Spicer to tell the real truth not falsehoods nor ‘alternative facts’.

*Fox News* did not publish any third party source quotes. The only quotes in the *Fox News* articles are quotes from Spicer taken from the press briefing transcript. This reveals the ideology of *Fox News* as right-wing, as there is no mention in the article of journalists and other notable public figures, such as other political operatives being shocked or repulsed by Spicer in the ‘fiery briefing’. Nowhere in the article does *Fox News* use the phrases “alternative facts” nor ‘falsehoods’, the article also does not attempt to correct and critique Spicer’s assertions regarding crowd size.

*The Wall Street Journal* quotes Spicer’s colleagues in the Trump administration, academic experts and former press secretary Ari Fleischer as third party sources. Spicer’s colleagues that were quoted are Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway and Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, who attempt to defend Spicer and explain his actions in the context of the Trump administration as a whole. *The Wall Street Journal* quotes Conway on *Meet the Press* claiming “I don’t think you can prove those numbers one way or another. There is no way to quantifying crowd numbers.” This is Conway’s explanation for why it was acceptable for Spicer to share ‘alternative facts’ with the press corps. Reince Priebus is quoted telling *Fox News Sunday* that “There is an obsession by the media to delegitimise this president and we

are not going to sit around and let that happen. We are going to fight back tooth and nail every day and twice on Sunday.” This quote tells the reader that the press corps deserved Spicer’s jeremiad, and that the Administration is only doing to the media, what the media is doing to them. The academics that are quoted in *The Wall Street Journal* are Martha Joynt Kumar, Director of the White House Transition Project and a professor at Towson University and Matthew Baum, professor of communications at Harvard University. It should also be noted the Kumar’s academic work was used as a foundation for this thesis. Kumar warns *The Wall Street Journal* that if Trump and the administration need to communicate in a tone that shows they are ‘governing all people’ and that Trump had to ‘broaden his reach to people who didn’t vote for him.” Baum also warns that “All the sound and fury of the past 48 hours has been about tone, relationships and style- completely swamping substance.” This chapter argues that the media’s close attention to tone, relationships and style completely suffocates the chance for robust political policy analysis in the media. Ari Fleischer, former press secretary is once again quoted, pointing out that many media outlets criticised Trump and other Administration officials as racists and other unflattering images and that part of Spicer’s jeremiad did focus on inaccurate reporting that Trump had removed a bust of civil rights leader Martin Luther King II for his office. Fleischer defended the Trump administration in saying “If you’re the White House, you look at that and you do get justifiably angry. The issue of the bust is not unserious.” By concluding the article with this quote *The Wall Street Journal* is suggesting to the reader that the media is at fault for this “dustup” not Spicer and the Trump administration.

CNN chose journalists from media outlets that propagate the same left-wing ideology as the majority of their third party source quotes, all quotes expressed an outraged shock. Glenn Thrush from *The New York Times* tweeted his shock at Spicer’s first press briefing “Jaw meet floor”, the previously quoted Chuck Todd of *Meet the Press* said “I’ve run out of adjectives”, and Karen Tumulty of *the Washington Post* said that Spicer’s demand of “this is what you guys should be writing about” was “chilling.” Ari Fleischer is once again quoted; this time he is saying “This is a statement you’re told to make by the President. And you know the President is watching.” This statement is framed to look like Fleischer is condemning Spicer, as well as implying that despite the fact that Spicer has no personal agency when it comes to performing as press secretary. Despite this, Spicer still let Trump down in his delivery.

This statement appears to be expressing that sentiment as preceding this quote *CNN* notes that “overwhelmingly negative” reactions were not only from journalists. Following Fleischer’s quote is a quote from Brian Fallon, who was said to become press secretary if Hillary Clinton was elected President instead of Donald Trump. Fallon said “Sean Spicer lacks the guts or integrity to refuse orders to go out and lie. He is a failure in this job on his first full day.” This harsh criticism highlights the left-wing bias that *CNN* possesses, however *CNN* also quotes a conservative commentator, perhaps as an effort to have the reporting appear more balanced. Conservative commentator Bill Kristol said “it is embarrassing, as an American, to watch this briefing by Sean Spicer from the podium at the White House. Not the RNC. The White House.” This quote highlights the importance of the institution of the White House. Kristol is suggesting that Spicer’s actions in the initial press briefing are not only embarrassing to the White House but also the entire population of the United States of America.

*The Associated Press* begins their third party source quotes with former CBS anchor during the Watergate Scandal, Dan Rather. Rather pleads “I hope people will stop, pull back for what we in television call a wide shot and see what is happening. This is a deliberate propaganda campaign.” Rather is urging people to look at news stories and government statements in their context of their environment, rather than just focusing on the narrative that is being presented. This is an interesting quote for a newswire agency to include, as previously mentioned newswire agencies usually report unbiased recounts. Rather’s quote reveals an ideological motive behind the linguistic choices, “propaganda” is widely viewed as a negative term, and Rather is suggesting that Spicer’s actions are unhealthy for democracy. Kellyanne Conway is the next third party source quote, Conway is directly quoted explaining the logic (or lack thereof) of ‘alternative facts’ and then indirectly quotes her of accusing *Meet the Press*’ Chuck Todd of laughing at her and saying that Todd symbolised how Trump has been treated by the media. This shows that the narrative of ‘poor victim Trump’ is being propagated holistically by the Trump administration. *The Associated Press* also quotes former Press secretary Ari Fleischer and goes further to connect the two press secretaries by highlighting that Spicer worked in Bush 43 administration too. Fleischer points out that “press secretaries have to walk a fine line of reflecting the thinking and wishes of the president while trying to help the people covering

him do their jobs. Fleischer also says that a press secretary cannot lie as “it will shorten your career.” This ominously suggests that this first briefing will ruin his future career prospects and plague his tenure at the White House.

*Reuters* does not quote any individuals as a third party source. However, *Reuters* does quote Washington Metro subway system who said that “193,000 users had entered the subway system by 11a.m. on Friday, compared with 513,000 at that time during Obama’s 2009 (first term) inauguration.” This corrects Spicer without bias who in the press briefing said that “420,000 used D.C. Metro public transit yesterday, which actually compares to 317,000 that used it for President Obama’s last (second term) inauguration.” (The White House, 2017). It should be noted that it is unjust to compare a second term inauguration to a first term inauguration. It’s like comparing a vow renewal ceremony to a church wedding of young lovers.

### 6.3.2 Press briefing #30 (April Ryan Confrontation)

*The New York Times* first third party source is a listener of April Ryan’s radio station, who according to *The New York Times* calls Ryan sounding ‘pained’ to express that she was “appalled at the way Sean Spicer with treating you (Ryan) with such disrespect.” *The New York Times* then quotes Ryan’s response: “I have people coming at me in all sorts of ways. I thank you so much.” This exchange paints Ryan as a sympathetic figure, an underdog journalist who is trying to get her story before deadline. The reader should be compelled to root for Ryan in her clashes with the White House. The article also references President Trump asking her to arrange a meeting between him and the Congressional Black Caucus, ‘are they friends of yours?’ Trump asked her unaware of racial nuances posing such a question to a black journalist may be. This reinforces to the reader that Ryan is the person to champion in this news story. The second third party source is Jonathan Capehart from *The Washington Post* stating “She is a force and you really have to be a force when you are an African-American woman in one of the clubbiest rooms in the country... You’ve got to be tough especially to be in that room for 20 years.” This statement expresses Ryan’s expertise as a journalist through her experience and suggests that despite societal barriers trying to hold her back, Ryan stands up for what she believes in. The article also informs the reader that Ryan is a single mother of two daughters. The final third party source is Jerry Lopes, the

president of program operations at Ryan’s network who said “the truth of the matter is if she doesn’t ask urban-related questions, they may never get asked.” Lopes also points out that the majority of the White House Press corps is made up of white men.

*Fox News* once again does not publish any third party sources. The article only references an unnamed reporter asking “Does the President still believe climate change is a hoax?” in an effort to explain why Spicer would have been agitated when he lashed out at Ryan, instructing her not to shake her head.

*The Wall Street Journal* did not publish an article on this news story. This will be discussed further in chapter seven.

*CNN*’s story does not state any third party sources, instead it is an article about Ryan expressing her thoughts about the incident of Spicer attempting to discipline her like a naughty child, on the *CNN* programme *New Day*. This article is a text that accompanied a video of April Ryan expressing her views.

*The Associated Press* does not have any third party source quotes as the focus of this news story is that Ryan had been hired as a *CNN* political contributor after the incident with Spicer. The article is only four paragraphs.

*Reuters* also did not publish about this story. This will also be discussed further in chapter seven in tandem with omission made by *The Wall Street Journal*.

### 6.3.3 Press briefing #36 (Assad/Hitler comparison)

*The New York Times* uses two organisations as third party sources as an attempt to explain how Spicer’s comparison of Assad to Hitler was not only inappropriate and insensitive, but incorrect. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is quoted in the article stating “160,000 to 180,000 Jews killed by the Nazis were from Germany” thereby proving that Hitler did in fact kill “his own people” despite Spicer’s assertion during the press briefing. The Syrian Network for Human Rights is also quoted saying that the Assad government

dropped more than 12,000 barrel bombs in their civil war efforts. Leading historian of the Holocaust, Professor Deborah Lipstadt was quoted in saying “Historically, it’s just wrong... Mr Spicer should not be making comparisons. It’s at best, not thought out, and at the worst it is latent anti-Semitism.” This is a quote of condemnation, proving that it was wrong of Spicer to make such a comparison. Not only factually wrong, but morally wrong. Democratic House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi is also indirectly quoted in calling for President Trump to fire Spicer from his post as press secretary. This reinforces *The New York Times* ideological agenda that Spicer is in the wrong in this situation and his apology was not sincere nor timely enough.

*Fox News* has three third party source quotes. The first is from House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi accusing Spicer of “downplaying the Holocaust” and called for Spicer to be fired as “Either he is speaking for the President, or the President should have known better to hire him.” This is a total condemnation of not only Spicer but also President Trump for choosing Spicer to be his spokesperson. A reader may view this quote as Pelosi attempting to undermine the President’s intelligence and authority. The quote from Republican Representative Lee Zeldin (who *Fox News* notes is Jewish) is less abrasive. Zeldin issued a statement quoted in the article saying “you can make the comparison a little differently and it would be accurate, but it’s important to clear up that Hitler did in fact use chemical warfare to murder innocent people.” This quote is framed as a critique akin to what a supervisor might give to a student on a thesis chapter, not as a criticism of a senior administration official whose salary is paid by taxpayer claiming that Hitler was not as vile because he had ‘Holocaust centres’. The ideology of *Fox News* as Republican sympathetic is very apparent in this quote as the article is framed as an apology and suggests that Spicer was making a grave and ignorant mistake. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis is then quoted on the issue saying “Even in World War II, chemical weapons were not used on battlefields. Since World War I, there has been an international convention on this. To stand idly by, when that convention is violated, that is what we had to take action on, urgently, in our own vital interest.” Mattis is a colleague of Spicer’s, this comment is a clarification which further suggests to the reader that Spicer’s comments were a misguided attempt to express these sentiments.

*The Wall Street Journal's* first third party source quote is from an unnamed senior Trump administration official who claimed that Spicer's comments "created a bit of a stir" and that it was decided internally for Spicer to issue a "full-throated apology". Ideologically, this expresses to the reader that the Trump administration on the whole is not an anti-Semitic, Holocaust denying institution. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi is once again quoted calling for President Trump to fire Spicer and "immediately disavow" his statements. Pelosi is also quoted further that the timing of these comments were inappropriate, as they were made on the first day of Passover. Steven Goldstein, then executive director of the Anne Frank Centre of Mutual Respect, also called for Spicer to be fired and claimed "Spicer's statement is the most evil slur upon a group of people we have ever heard from a White House press secretary." This is another harsh condemnation of Spicer. Anne Frank was a famous Jewish diarist who died of typhus in the Bergen-Belsen camp, two weeks before the liberation.

*CNN* first quotes Defense Secretary James Mattis as a third party source with his clarification at the Pentagon of Spicer's comments, just as *Fox News* had, also stating that there has been sanctions against chemical warfare since the Great War. What is most interesting about the *CNN* story is that they quoted former first daughter Chelsea Clinton (who is also the daughter of Trump's election opponent Hillary Clinton) who gracefully tweeted "I hope @PressSec takes time to visit @HolocaustMuseum. It's a few blocks away." Clinton's husband is also Jewish, and this shows that Clinton had various personal motivations to make a public statement about Spicer's actions, and as *CNN* is a progressive media organisation it is fair to suggest that Clinton's comment has a place in the article. Steven Goldstein is once again quoted by *CNN*. However, unlike *The Wall Street Journal*, *CNN* notes that Goldstein believes none of Spicer's multiple attempts at apologising merit forgiveness, as it took Spicer too long to "sort of get it right". This is a harsh criticism, and exposes the left-wing anti-Trump ideology that *CNN* possesses. The article ends with Pelosi statement calling for Spicer to be fired.

*The Associated Press* quotes both Defense Secretary James (Jim) Mattis in his clarification just as *Fox News* and *CNN* did and Representative Nancy Pelosi in her condemnation as did *Fox News*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *CNN*. *The Associated Press* also quotes Democratic

Senator Ben Cardin tweet “Someone get @PressSec a refresher history course on Hitler stat (hashtag)#Icantbelievehereallysaidthat.” This tweet can be seen as a sardonic criticism of Spicer’s comments and suggests that Hitler’s use of the gas chamber is in fact common knowledge. Then once again, Republican Lee Zeldin and Steven Goldstein are quoted. However, Goldstein’s quote is attributed to “The New York-based Anne Frank Centre of Mutual Respect. A third party source that is featured in *The Associated Press* but not in the other five articles included in this journalistic discourse analysis, is from Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition. Brookes said in a statement “using the issue of the Holocaust or Hitler is problematic on many levels... He’s bent over backwards to make clear those views are not his, not what he was trying to say. We accept that and move on.” Brookes represents a Republican organisation, as Spicer is the press secretary for a Republican president and the former Director of Communications and Strategy at the Republican National Committee, it could be suggested that the political interest of the Republican Jewish Coalition to forgive Spicer. This quote also reinforces to the reader that Spicer made a stupid mistake as opposed to being purposefully anti-Semitic.

*Reuters* only has one third party source quote. Steven Goldstein, the executive director of the Anne Frank Center for Mutual Respect is quoted in the last paragraph calling for Spicer to be fired. “Sean Spicer now lacks the integrity to serve as White House press secretary, and President Trump must fire him at once.” This quote is in the last paragraph in the *Reuters* article, this quote provides the article with a strong memorable finish that will stay in the reader’s mind and therefore, heavily influences the tone of the article as a condemnation of Spicer, instead of an unbiased account of what Spicer had said. However, one could argue it is impossible to report on events that invoke the Holocaust in an unbiased fashion because of the heinous crimes committed against millions of people simply because of their religion, family history, culture, or sexuality. It is the responsibility of the free press to hold political powers to account to ensure that the events of the Holocausts are not repeated.



#### 6.4 How does The White House Press corps affect the American Public Sphere?

It can be said that The White House Press corps is the human core of the American Mediated Public Sphere. McNair (2000), claims that in Britain lobby correspondents, who report on the daily activities of politicians, insider party politics, and government apparatuses are the human-core of the political public sphere. As the lobby correspondents and the White House Press corps complete similar journalistic functions, it is fair to apply McNair's assertion to the White House Press corps. Both groups of journalists are key definers of political reality (McNair, 2000). Therefore, one would assume that press secretary best practice would be to conduct a cordial relationship with the press.

According to Herman and Chomsky (2002), it is the purpose of the mass media to service the populace by communicating messages and symbols that entertain and inform, as well as indoctrinate individuals with values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that allow the individuals to function within the institutional structures of world society actively. Herman and Chomsky (2002) also claim that for the mass media to serve this function, they must engage in systematic propaganda. It is important to note that in the United States, the media is not controlled by a State Monopoly. Therefore, the propaganda that is espoused by the media is less likely to be political propaganda, and rather it is more likely to be corporate propaganda. Despite this distinction, the media still serves the dominant elite. The Propaganda Model emphasises the elite's domination of the media and the marginalisation of dissents and operates through the five filters: Ownership, Advertising, Information-sourcing for the Mass Media, Flak and Media Criticisms, and Anti-Communism as a control mechanism (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). In this context, one could surmise that the filters of ownership and advertising could be in effect when reporting on the Trump administration. As Donald Trump has been a well-known hotelier, businessman, and reality television host a cynic may think that certain media outlets are attempting to embarrass the administration in their coverage due to a bad business relationship with the Trump Organization before he became the President. It is interesting that media organisations owned by Comcast (*NBC News* and *MSNBC*), who produced and broadcasted Trump's reality television show, *The Apprentice* were somewhat sympathetic in their portrayal of Spicer. Other somewhat sympathetic outlets were all owned by 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox or News

*Corporation*. Both of these companies during the time of data collection were owned by Rupert Murdoch. According to the author of *Fire and Fury*, an exposé on the Trump administration, Michael Wolff (2017), Murdoch was good friends with President Trump's Daughter and Son-in-law, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner. The couple also served as two of Trump's top advisers.

The media market is multi-layered and supplies news to markets of varying intellectual levels and ideologies. McNair (2000) categorises the differences with three designations: elite, mid-market, and popular. Elite publications such as *Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times* contain more political news stories and are often used as sources for other media outlets' news stories. The amount of influence on the American public sphere could also be categorised by the seating arrangements in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room. As previously mentioned, in the front row of the press briefing rooms sits seven media outlets that arguably are the most influential on the American mediated public sphere. The outlets include the newswire services *Reuters* and *The Associated Press*; these services tend to report from a non-biased standpoint as other media outlets used their reporting as either a basis for their own reporting or use the text verbatim and accredit the service in the by-line. Objective reporting means that the texts can be purchased and used by outlets that propagate different ideologies, therefore maximising their profits. The three major leading broadcast television networks, *ABC News*, *CBS News*, and *NBC News* also have pride of place in the front row. Gerbner and Gross (1976) attest that for the majority of the twentieth century, broadcast television was the chief source for cultivating public opinion, as churches were for the preceding centuries. Broadcast television was seen as 'the first screen' and was the primary source that the public received their news information. Presently, media consumers like to collect their news information from the internet via smartphones, tablets or desktop computers. Therefore, most, if not all media outlets also have an online presence where they post their content. The final two outlets are 24 Hour Cable News Channels. *CNN*, which holds a left or liberal bias and Donald Trump nicknames "*Clinton News Network*" (Trump, D. J. [@realDonaldTrump], 6 June 2016) and *Fox News* which holds a right-wing or conservative bias and has had the nickname "*Faux News*". It is interesting to note that *Fox News* was launched in 1996, as an ideological

counterpart to *CNN*, as then-proprietor Rupert Murdoch believed that too many media outlets possessed an overt left-wing bias (McKnight, 2010).

These 24-hour news channels operate under the same conventions as network television news. However, programme hosts are allowed to editorialise and offer their opinions on policy matters and the political process. These opinions can affect the public sphere greatly, as members of the public that have a low level of media literacy may perceive these editorialised comments and opinions to be facts. This could result in members of the public being less likely to engage in dissenting or alternative discourses to what is being presented by their preferred cable news outlet. Therefore, if media consumers are only consuming their news from *CNN*, then they will have an opinion of Sean Spicer that he is an embarrassment to the Trump administration, as well as incompetent and unfit to be a Presidential spokesperson. Whereas, if a media consumer were to only engage in *Fox News*, they would believe that Spicer as a press secretary was assertive in correcting the press and apologetic when he makes a mistake.

Moreover, it is important to note that all 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox and News Corporation media outlets follow the same editorial policy set out by Rupert Murdoch. This means that Murdoch decides his opinion on an issue and then all media outlets around the globe propagate these opinions as facts. The most obvious example of global editorial policy is the switch from News Corporation media outlets denying climate change with well-known Fox News Host Sean Hannity of *Hannity* referring to global warming as "phoney science from the left". In May 2007, Murdoch announced that the company could no longer claim that climate change was a myth and that it was a genuine threat to the world. Interestingly, he also claimed to be committed to the goal of News Corporation becoming carbon neutral by 2010 (McKnight, 2010). In, 2011 Murdoch announced in a corporate memo that this initiative had been a success (Grim, 2011).

These are two strikingly different portrayals of a political operative. Citizens can only get an accurate representation of Spicer by reading press briefing transcripts, or watching the recordings where possible or consuming a wide variety of media that propagate a range of varying ideologies. What is most interesting is the contrast between the source quotes used

in *Fox News* and *The Wall Street Journal*, this is due to both media organisations being owned by Rupert Murdoch. *Fox News* did not have any third party source quotes in the stories regarding the initial press briefing and press briefing #30, that condone nor condemn Spicer's behaviour. By sticking to traditional reporting of the events, *Fox News* is revealing their political ideology and their alliance to the Trump administration by only reporting the information that they received from the press briefings. The conventions of straight reportage are used as a tactic to downplay or avoid talking about the extraordinary comments and actions that Spicer performed in the press briefings. In the article pertaining to press briefing #36, the article contains three third party source quotes. Two of the sources are from republican sources, including Secretary Mattis who attempted to clarify Spicer's minced words when comparing al-Assad to Hitler. In contrast *The Wall Street Journal* quotes academic experts, Spicer's colleagues in the Trump administration, community leaders and former press secretary Ari Fleischer. Unlike the liberal outlets, *The Wall Street Journal* chose not to cite the opinions of journalists. *The Wall Street Journal* only published stories regarding the initial press briefing and press briefing #36. In the story regarding the initial press briefing the third party source quotes tend to suggest that the media was deserving of Spicer's jeremiad. The third party source quotes from the article about press briefing #36 suggest that Spicer's comparison was misguided and thought through, however it does cite Pelosi's and Goldstein's calls to President Trump to fire Spicer.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed how the events at the case study press briefings resulted in a fractured, contentious relationship between Press secretary Sean Spicer and the White House press corps. Although news media stories about the political process have a valued place in political journalism, an overrepresentation of political process articles dwarfing the number of articles published that concerned policy matters is damaging to the public sphere. According to a study conducted by The Pew Research Center (2017), when reporting on the Trump administration, journalists favoured reporting on character and leadership (a part of process reporting) as opposed to reporting on policy decisions.

Political source relations are a part of the political process, without political source relations and the Press secretary political journalism would be nothing but gossip and mere fantasy (Sanders, 2009). Spicer and the Trump administration, however, would argue that the even with the Press secretary political journalism is still nothing but gossip and mere fantasy. Members of the White House Press corps believe that it is their job to report with veracity, but the two parties are at an impasse because they have two different versions of truth (or as Kellyanne Conway phrase it 'alternative facts'). Towle (1997), asserts that a cordial working relationship with the Press is a key component in being classed as a successful Press secretary. As discussed in this chapter the relationship between Sean Spicer and the White House Press corps can be classed as one of the worst in the history of the position, because of his unnecessary aggression being highly documented in the news media, globally. This chapter also argues that if Spicer maintained a more cordial relationship with the Press corps, the news stories would have focused more about policy announcements rather than Spicer demanding that April Ryan "stop shaking her head" or about claiming that Assad was worse than Hitler during Passover.

The political source relations are manifested in the reportage through third party source quotes. An overwhelming number of journalists from other media outlets that share the same ideology are quoted in the sample articles. For example, *The New York Times* often quoted journalists that worked for *CNN* and *The Washington Post*. All three media outlets propagate a liberal ideology.

By favouring personality- or lack thereof as the subject of a news story over policy, the mediated public sphere no longer is the arena for rational political argument. For example, *CNN* repeatedly insinuated that Spicer was an embarrassment to the Trump administration, and ignorant instead of focusing on contents of the press briefings. This is damaging to the American Mediated Public Sphere as media consumers tend to favour receiving their news information from the sources that propagate the same ideology (The Pew Research Center, 2017). In the case of the right-wing ideology, Rupert Murdoch owned 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox and News Corporation during Sean Spicer's tenure as Press secretary, therefore with his large concentration of ownership and global editorial policy it is likely that an individual would only consume media from Murdoch owned media outlets across media types. This is

especially dangerous to the public sphere as this means that one person is deciding the global public discourse that is accepted as truth by many media consumers.

In sum, negative political source relations can be damaging to the political mediated public sphere. If the relationship between the Press secretary and the Press corps and their owners is negative, this can impact editorialising and subjective commentary in cases such as Sean Spicer demanding April Ryan to stop shaking her head.

## 7. Political Journalism and News Values vis-à-vis Spicer's relationship to the White House Press corps.

Political journalism, just as news, in general, is not merely a summary of 'what has happened'; the media at large is not a perfect mirror of reality. Instead, the media is like a fun-house of mirrors projecting a warped reality, emphasising certain parts and minimising others. It is important to note that news, political or otherwise is a product and fashioned from a set of historical, cultural, economic, and institutional norms and regulations (Sanders, 2009). The fabric of political news is woven from opinion, speculation, leaks, recounts, and news subsidies, as journalists and politicians struggle to control how public perception is shaped.

The following chapter aims to contextualise political journalism as a practice and as an epistemology, which is grounded in the beliefs of 'the public's right to know' and 'the media's position in society to hold the elite to account'. This chapter will explain how journalists perform their different functions of chroniclers, news reporters, critics, commentators and pundits, as well as interrogators. The chapter will then explain how the selection of news stories is decided through the concept of news values. This explanation will evaluate both Galtung and Ruge's (1965) news values, and the Harcup and O'Neill's (2016) updated news values, which emphasise how social media has affected news selection. The chapter will then apply these news values across the three case study stories of the initial press briefing, press briefing #30 when he confronted April Ryan, and Press Briefing #36 when he compared Assad to Hitler. From the sample of media outlets, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fox News*, *CNN*, *Reuters*, and *The Associated Press* have been chosen to be analysed as these media outlets are representatives of newspaper, cable television networks, and newswire agencies. *The New York Times* and *CNN* are liberal media organisations, *Fox News* and *The Wall Street Journal* are conservative media organisations, and as *The Associated Press* and *Reuters* are newswire services, they do not propagate a particular ideology and are seen as non-biased by institutions such as The Pew Research Center (2017). These six media organisations are all considered prestigious and influential to the public sphere.

## 7.1 Conventions of Political Journalism

Political journalism is at the epicentre of the political communications process. The political communications process is a relational framework between politician, journalist, media owners, and press secretaries/ political public relations practitioners (Kuhn & Neveu, 2002). Due to the idea of 'the public's right to know', political journalism boasts the title of 'the most sacred part of journalism' and enjoys a noble status within the journalistic field (Neveu, 2002). Political journalism, however, is not without its challenges. Political journalists are often cast as victims caught between the weight of public opinion and the powerful influence of powerful political actors. Journalists are also threatened by their shrinking professional and intellectual autonomy, as newsroom convergence and technological creates further time constraints on story deadlines (Kuhn & Neveu, 2002). Due to these time constraints, news subsidies become a large percentage of news. One can class press briefings as a news subsidy (Neveu, 2002). However, political journalists are not passive cogs in the communications machine, the articles in the content analysis sample that ridicule Sean Spicer's political performance and poor source relations management as discussed in the previous chapters prove this. Sixty per cent of the total sample articles in the content analysis contain subjective commentary, that most often was highlighting when the Trump administration was straying from convention, while 57.7 per cent of sample articles directly cited when Spicer exhibited illegitimate aggressive behaviour. Another constraint on political journalism is the transmission and intelligibility of the beat. Civics and the processes of government are not considered general knowledge, and journalists are often tasked with simplifying policy matters. Other specialist beats such economics and science face similar issues (Neveu, 2002). This could be a reason for the softening of political communication and the preference for reporting the political process, focusing on personalities, drama and conflict (Sanders, 2009) over policy as mentioned in previous chapters. This is also expressed in the content analysis as 79 per cent of total sample articles had Spicer as the first quoted or mentioned person, mostly by his name rather than the title White House press secretary. This is unusual as the White House press secretary is supposed to be the source, not the story. Neveu (2002, pp. 23-24) believes that a reason for the softening of political communication is because "the direct experience of political activities



is more transient than permanent experiences such as being a sports fan or a consumer." In the United States, Presidential elections only occur once every four years, and most citizens do not engage in political activities outside of this time.

Sanders (2009) specifies that political journalism is both a practice and an epistemology. As a practice, political journalism is broadly considered to be an organised, autonomous, and accredited discourse about politics including news, comment and opinion. Reporting politics is a historically and culturally situated practice that is born out of the surrounding social conditions (Sanders, 2009). As seen in the content analysis sample, subjective commentary has become a heavily featured component of political journalism outputs. These politics journalism outputs can be independent, biased, partisan, policy or personality orientated. As previously mentioned, without accredited sources such as the White House Press secretary, political reporting would be nothing but political rumour (Sanders, 2009), but without autonomy from political power, political journalism would merely be propaganda. Political journalism as an epistemology for the greater part is based upon the reliance of authoritative sources. Stories are structured around claims to truth and facts provided by sources named or otherwise. It is because of this reliance that the tension between Sean Spicer and the White House press corps over what is truth and what is not, became a heavy feature in political journalism itself. Political journalism maps power, and a press secretary that does not have the faith of their press corps is somewhat powerless and therefore worthy of being reported about in the international news media as a method to hold the press secretary accountable for their actions and comments.

Political journalists perform many functions in political journalism. Political journalists act as chroniclers, news reporters, critics, pundits and commentators, as well as interrogators (Sanders, 2009). A chronicler is tasked with a faithful recount of political events, a prime example of this is the British Press Gallery reporters, who would report on the proceeds of parliament. In American Political Journalism, a journalist would act as a chronicler if they were to recount a meeting between foreign leaders without comment, or broadcasts on the channel C-SPAN (Sanders, 2009). Political journalists act as news reporters when they cover events such as press briefings and news releases. Investigative journalists are also known to move away from the official source agenda and tend to agitate those in charge. Those

actions especially angered Sean Spicer, as he seemed to view himself as the only correct source, in some cases even contradicting President Donald Trump. Neveu (2002, p.31) states that “the political journalist is both an insider, who knows the codes and secrets of the tribe, and a critic whose point of honour is to decipher for the audience the secrets of their political competitor colleagues.” Political criticism does not only exist in the realm of political journalism, but also in comedy. Actress Melissa McCarthy won an Emmy for her impression of Sean Spicer during press briefings on the popular comedy sketch show *Saturday Night Live*. Pundits are considered experts in an area of specialism. White House Correspondents, can also act as political commentators and pundits for other media organisations. As mentioned previously and below, April D. Ryan, the correspondent for the *American Urban Radio Networks*, also works as a political commentator and pundit on *CNN*. Journalists, such as Ryan have achieved their authoritative voice through their long experience with politics and therefore have perceived insider knowledge. As an interrogator the primary tool in their journalism tool-kit is their role as a ‘finder-out’, journalists must investigate claims and statements made by the government. Journalists as interrogators are exemplifying the idea of ‘journalists speaking for the people’ (Sanders, 2009).

## 7.2 News Values in the Twenty-First Century

### 7.2.1 What are the updated News Values?

News Values are a study of newsworthiness and a tool utilised by both journalists and public relations professionals alike, to construct the mediated world presented to news audiences. Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge (1965, pp.66-67) codified these news values in the seminal study named "The Structure of Foreign News". These news values are listed in the literature review chapter.

It is important to note that news values are only a partial explanation of journalistic intentions and are a list of subjective judgements. Moreover, news values themselves are a part of a constructed ideology, as echoed in Herman and Chomsky (1988; 2002) propaganda model. It is important to consider the economic factors in news selection, pressure from

proprietors and advertisers may result in certain stories having the preference in the news hierarchy or not being published at all, to go against their wishes would be considered 'biting the hand that feeds you'. (Shallot & Johnson, 2006, p. 157). Another economic factor is time constraints, as newsrooms continuously experience cutbacks in staffing as well as increasing demand for content, news subsidies increasingly shape the news content (Shallot and Johnson, 2016), press briefings could be considered a genre of news subsidies.

With the development of social media, the business model of journalism has also changed. According to Phillips (2015), social networking platform Facebook drives more traffic to media outlet websites. The traditional model of audiences being 'passive consumers' has been turned on its head, as Facebook users can disseminate media articles via Facebook Statuses or private messages (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016). According to Harcup and O'Neill (2016), stories that are more likely to be shared on Facebook tend to contain an element of humour. This could be an explanation for why 74 per cent of total sample articles contained subjective comment and to be humorous is to be subjective. This change in business model has introduced the new news value "shareability". Stories that have "shareability" are more likely to be disseminated through social media users' networks (Harcup and O'Neill, 2016). The full list of Harcup and O'Neill's (2016) News Values are as follows:

- *Exclusivity*: Stories generated by, or available first to, the news organisation as a result of interviews, letters, investigations, surveys, polls, and so on.
- *Bad news*: Stories with particularly negative overtones such as death, injury, defeat and loss (of a job, for example).
- *Conflict*: Stories concerning conflict such as controversies, arguments, splits, strikes, fights, insurrections and warfare.
- *Surprise*: Stories that have an element of surprise, contrast and/or the unusual about them.
- *Audio-visuals*: Stories that have arresting photographs, video, audio and/or which can be illustrated with infographics.
- *Shareability*: Stories that are thought likely to generate sharing and comments via Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media.
- *Entertainment*: Soft stories concerning sex, show-business, sport, lighter human

interest, animals, or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, witty headlines or lists.

- *Drama*: Stories concerning an unfolding drama such as escapes, accidents, searches, sieges, rescues, battles or court cases.
- *Follow-up*: Stories about subjects already in the news.
- *The power elite*: Stories concerning powerful individuals, organisations, institutions or corporations.
- *Relevance*: Stories about groups or nations perceived to be influential with, or culturally or historically familiar to, the audience.
- *Magnitude*: Stories perceived as sufficiently significant in the large numbers of people involved or in potential impact, or involving a degree of extreme behaviour or extreme occurrence.
- *Celebrity*: Stories concerning people who are already famous.
- *Good news*: Stories with particularly positive overtones such as recoveries, breakthroughs, cures, wins and celebrations.
- *News organisation's agenda*: Stories that set or fit the news organisation's own agenda, whether ideological, commercial or as part of a specific campaign.

Below is an analysis of the news values that caused the case study press briefings to become headlines in the influential news outlets: *The New York Times*, *Fox News*, *The Associated Press*, *Reuters*, *CNN*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. These outlets have been picked because they represent both sides of the ideological spectrum, and hail from different original media modes. *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, are both newspapers. *Fox News* and *CNN* are both rolling 24-hour cable news channels. *The Associated Press* and *Reuters* are distinguished wire services that can serve media outlets as a base for story content, hence their tendency to focus on objective reporting rather than subjective commentary.

Comparably to the content analysis, this analysis will focus on the three paragraphs of the news stories. However, the first source quote of the article will also be included.

It should be noted that the powerful elite is the news value that appears in all of the news articles in the sample. This is because Sean Spicer is the top spokesperson (a position of power) for the White House (a powerful institution). To avoid repetition, this reason for this

news value will not be included in the proceeding analysis. The articles frequently reference Spicer as "White House press secretary Sean Spicer" or "top spokesperson Spicer".

### 7.2.2 Initial Press Briefing News Values

The lead paragraph of *The New York Times* article reads as: "For wary Washington journalists, it seemed only a matter of time before Donald J. Trump's presidency would lead to a high-tension standoff between his administration and the news media. But on Day 1?" The news values that can be selected from the lead are conflict, the powerful elite and surprise. Conflict is evident in the language choice of "high-tension standoff" which paints a mental picture of a Hollywood Western showdown between an outlaw and a sheriff cocking their guns. The first quoted source in the article, the president of the White House Correspondents' Association, Jeff Mason claimed that Spicer's actions were "absolutely surprising and stunning. People were surprised. I was surprised. It's not what I was expecting for the first statement by the press secretary in the press room." As previously stated in chapters four and five, Spicer did not conform to the expectation of a presidential press secretary. This is surprising as mentioned in chapter four; Spicer wrote the training manual on how to be an effective Republican congressional press secretary. To simply explain how surprising Spicer's behaviour was during the first press briefing, it can be compared to a first date. On a first date, a person would not expect their date to launch into a 'fiery jeremiad' claiming that the other person has been lying and defaming them. If a person were to experience that, it would be expected that they would share that experience with their social network around them, both in person and possibly online. Therefore, it would be expected that Spicer's surprising behaviour made for a news headline. The powerful elite is an obvious news value as Donald J. Trump had just been inaugurated as the President of the United States of America. Furthermore, one could suggest that this story has the news values of 'news organisation's agenda'. *The New York Times* openly endorsed Donald J. Trump's election rival Hillary Rodham Clinton in the 2016 general election. It could be suggested that by highlighting Sean Spicer's unexpectedly poor behaviour, they were attempting to ridicule Now-President Donald J. Trump.

The lead paragraph of the *Fox News* article reads as: “White House press secretary Sean Spicer angrily accused the media Saturday of “false reporting on the inauguration as a part of what he called a ‘shameful’ attempt to minimize enthusiasm for President Trump, beginning his tenure as the administration’s top spokesman on a combative note.” Once again the news values of the powerful elite, conflict and news organisation’s agenda. The news value of surprise, however, does not appear to be selected for this story. This can be attributed to the news organisation's agenda. *Fox News*, was a Rupert Murdoch owned outlet, it was tasked with following the Global Editorial Policy and presenting conservative (Republican) political figures in a positive light. This is evident as Spicer was the first source quoted in the article, stating that the news organisations had been ‘irresponsible and reckless’.

The lead paragraph of *The Wall Street Journal* article reads as: “Defending a series of false statements by the official White House spokesman, a senior Trump administration adviser on Sunday the official has been invoking “alternative facts’ rather than untruths.” The news values that are apparent in this article are follow-up, shareability, the powerful elite, and conflict. This article is about Kellyanne Conway defending Spicer’s comments the day after the initial press briefing. This story also has shareability as well, due to the follow-up element and absurdity of the phrase “alternative facts”. Once again, this story is about the powerful elite as both Conway and Spicer is a part of the Trump administration. The conflict is demonstrated both in referencing the events of the initial press briefing by stating that Spicer “accused them (the media) of misstating the crowd size at the inauguration.” As well as quoting Conway in her discussion on NBC’s “Meet the Press”, “you’re saying it’s a falsehood and Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts to that,” she said adding that it was impossible to count the crowd size. “I don’t think you can prove those numbers one way or another. There’s no way to quantify those crowd numbers.” This shows that more conflict was created off of the initial conflict of the initial press briefing.

The lead paragraph of the *CNN* article reads as: “That’s what you guys should be writing and covering,” new White House press secretary Sean Spicer angrily lectured reporters on Saturday during his first remarks from the podium of the press briefing room.” The news values that appear from the lead are once again, the powerful elite and conflict. Once again,

the power elite news value for the aforementioned reason, as well as placing where Spicer made his remarks "from the podium of the press briefing room". The choice to contextualise the physical space where the remarks were made draws upon the discourse of power relations which suggests that Spicer has the power or authority over the press corps in a similar context to the discourse of the classroom. Spicer stands at the front of the journalists like a teacher would in front of a class, and the journalists, like schoolchildren, may only speak or ask questions when called upon (Fairclough, 2006). In the following paragraph which quotes Spicer saying "this was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period," the news value of News Organisation's agenda becomes apparent in the subjective comment of "Spicer said, contradicting all available data." This suggests that *CNN* is against the Trump administration and wishes to undermine their efforts to present President Trump's inauguration as an undoubted success. In the next paragraph, they provide evidence to their claim that Spicer was telling untruths as it references the aerial photos and the Nielsen ratings of the Obama inauguration. The headline also reveals the news organisation's agenda in stating "White House press secretary attacks media for accurately reporting inauguration crowds."

The lead paragraph *The Associated Press* article reads as: 'Donald Trump's "running war" on the media is continuing into his presidency, with statements over the weekend calling into question the extent to which information from the White House can be trusted.' The news values that can be identified in the lead are celebrity, and once again, conflict and the powerful elite. Celebrity is the first news value that is drawn upon, by referencing the celebrity of Donald Trump. As previously mentioned, Trump was famous due to his business acumen and hosting a reality television show before becoming a presidential candidate. The news value of conflict is referenced by the linguistic choice of 'running war' this has dramatic connotations of a longwinded battle between Trump and the media. This phrase was also used in the article's headline and followed up with the subjective statement that it is undermining trust. What is interesting about *The Associated Press*' article is that despite being a wire service, usually known for objectivity, references the opinion veteran journalist Dan Rather. Rather, states that it was the first time he could recall false material being delivered in this way and that Spicer was engaging in a 'deliberate propaganda campaign'.

The lead paragraph of the *Reuters* article reads as: 'The White House on Saturday accused the media of framing photographs to understate the crowd that attended Donald Trump's inauguration, a new jab in a long-running fight between the new president and the news organisations who cover him.' The news values that appear to have made this story a headline for Reuters are once again, the powerful elite and conflict. The news value of the powerful elite is elicited through the referring to Spicer making his statement as "The White House", as these statements were made during the first full day of the Trump administration, it is understandable that Spicer would be referred to as 'The White House' as he was not yet a household name of ridicule, and the fodder for Melissa McCarthy's *Saturday Night Live* impression. The lead also elicits the news value of the powerful elite by referring to Donald J. Trump as 'the new president'. Conflict is the second news value that can be found in this article's lead. Conflict is implied in the lead through the linguistic choices of "accused the media", and "a new jab". Conflict is further implied in the second paragraph via the phrases "fiery statement" and "lashed out", these are poetic linguistic choices, which demonstrate the extremities of Spicer's behaviour, because of this one could suggest that the news value of magnitude is also enacted (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016). Another news value that is also found in the second paragraph is surprise, the journalists highlight in that Spicer's statements were "unusual" as Spicer claimed that sharing aerial photos that show gaps in the inauguration was "shameful and wrong" as it was an attempt to "lessen the enthusiasm".

### 7.2.3 Press Briefing #30 News Values

The lead paragraph of *The New York Times* article reads as: "By the time April D. Ryan left the White House briefing room on Tuesday, she was already making headlines: on live television, President Trump's press secretary, Sean M. Spicer had cut off her questions to chastise her for what he deemed an inappropriate shake of her head." The news values that are apparent in the lead are powerful elite, conflict and surprise. The news values of conflict become apparent in the linguistic choices of the phrase "cut off her question to chastise her". This shows how the two hostile actions were performed together in an attempt to put Ryan in her place using informal discourse and personal discourse. The final news value that



is present in the lead is surprise, surprise is expressed in the phrase “for what he deemed an inappropriate shake of her head.” This is a surprise, as although it is usual for a press secretary to rebuke an inappropriate question, or talking out of turn. It is unusual for a press secretary to reprimand a journalist for a non-verbal action. If Ryan had disagreed with Spicer’s statements out loud, Spicer’s rebuking might have been justified. Surprise is also present in the third paragraph; *The New York Times* quotes a listener whom they describe as “a pained-sounding woman named Pam” in saying “I was appalled at the way Sean Spicer was treating you with such disrespect.” The language choice to describe her as ‘pained-sounds’ indicates the enormity of Spicer’s actions against Ryan. Through the discourse of power relations, the choice to include this quote assists in the presentation of April Ryan being the victim of this incident, not an equal opponent.

The lead paragraph of the *Fox News* article reads as: “White House press secretary Sean Spicer said on Tuesday the White House did not seek to block former acting Attorney General Sally Yates’ testimony and denied that the White House has pressured the House Intelligence Committee to cancel her scheduled testimony during the investigation into ties between Russian agents and Trump campaign officials.” It should be noted that the headline for this article is “Stop shaking your head”: White House press secretary scolds reporter.” Therefore, the lead of the article and its headline do not match. This arguably could be a result of the new organisation’s agenda, as well as poor journalism. The article takes nine paragraphs before it begins to explain the events promised in the headline, one could suggest that the journalist was acting as a chronicler. However, *Fox News* does not have a reputation for this particular function. It has a reputation for conservative punditry. Paragraph 10 reads as “The briefing became even more contentious when American Urban Radio Networks Washing Bureau Chief April D. Ryan asked her first question: “how does this administration try to revamp its image, two and a half months in, you have this Yates story, ... you’ve got Russia, you’ve got wire-tapping.” This paragraph emotes the news values of news organisation's agenda and conflict. News organisation's agenda is emoted as this paragraph portrays Ryan as the antagonist, attempting to push Spicer into engaging into an argument with her. *Fox News*, was a Rupert Murdoch owned media outlet, and therefore must obey the global editorial policy set forth by Murdoch, such as discussion Republican political actors in a positive frame.

Both *The Wall Street Journal* and *Reuters* did not publish about this story. By examining the multilevel framework model of the softening of political communication (Otto, Glogger & Boukes, 2017), one could surmise that these two media outlets did not publish about this story as it would have been considered soft news with sensationalist content. Otto, Glogger and Boukes (2017, pp. 140-141) define sensationalism as coverage that makes use of journalistic strategies and audio/visual production features, aiming at assumed effects on an audience. These effects include arousal, emotion and empathy. They also define soft news as coverage of non-political topics in the context of political communication with rather personal than societal focus (Otto et al., 2017). The other media outlets that published about this story took a 'person-centric' focus, primarily focusing on the reporter April D. Ryan as a victim and then Sean Spicer secondly, as the aggressor in the situation. To succinctly make the distinction, hard news stories are stories relating to policy issues, whereas soft news stories are non-policy related issues, which in previous chapters have been referred to as "process articles" (McNair, 2000). *The Wall Street Journal* most likely would have chosen to omit this story as they are a Murdoch-owned conservative broadsheet newspaper, and soft news that vilifies the Trump administration would go against the global editorial policy and therefore against the news value of the news organisation's agenda (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016). As *Reuters* is a non-biased newswire service, one could suggest that this soft-news story that negatively portrays a Trump administration official goes against the news organisation's agenda.

The lead paragraph of the *CNN* article reads as: "A veteran White House correspondent who engaged in a tense exchange with White House press secretary Sean Spicer said Wednesday the media is "under attack" from the Trump administration." The news values that are apparent in this lead are conflict, powerful elite, and news organisation's agenda. The news value of conflict is expressed through the linguistic choices describing Ryan and Spicer's encounter as "a tense exchange" and quoting Ryan's claim that the press is "under attack". The news organisation's agenda is also apparent, as previously mentioned in chapter four, given Sean Spicer regularly attempted to discredit *CNN* and its correspondent Jim Acosta. By quoting Ryan in the second paragraph in saying "it's about discrediting credible media", this acts as Ryan giving *CNN* an endorsement as a credible media. In the third paragraph follow-

up is also a news value that influenced the publishing of this article, as April Ryan's comments were made the day after Spicer instructed her to stop shaking her head.

The lead paragraph *The Associated Press* article reads as: "April Ryan of Urban Radio Networks has become one of the most visible White House correspondents since President Donald Trump took over, and she's now been hired as a political contributor for CNN." The news value present in this lead is celebrity. The news value of celebrity is apparent in the lead by the journalistic choice to label Ryan as "one of the most visible White House correspondents." This statement gives Ryan the gravitas to become a *CNN* political contributor, and why the other media outlets and their audiences should care about her new appointment. The second paragraph shows the news values of follow-up and conflict. This news story is a follow-up from the original incident as it reminds the reader that Ryan "was scolded by White House press secretary Sean Spicer to stop shaking her head in response to one of his answers at a press briefing last week." The news value of conflict is also elicited in the preceding quote, as well as stating that "the incident" drew widespread attention and criticism online, via social media sites such as Twitter from journalists and citizens alike. Surprise appears in the third paragraph as it recounts that April Ryan is no stranger to unusual requests, previous to becoming a news headline because Spicer demanded she stop shaking her head, President Trump had asked Ryan in a press conference to arrange a meeting between him and the Congressional Black Caucus. Trump asked her this in the press conference because she was also African American. As noted by *The Associated Press*, such a task is beyond the responsibility of journalists in the White House press corps.

#### 7.2.4 Press Briefing #36 News Values

Before each article's news values is dissected, it is important to note that this story contains the news value of bad news. According to Harcup and O'Neill (2016), the news values of bad news pertain to stories about people expressing derogatory and discriminatory attitudes, these attitudes include sexism, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and ableism. When minimising the Holocaust, whether intentionally or as Spicer phrased it 'mistakenly' (Gomez, 2017), all of these discriminatory attitudes are nuanced. As Merica and Lander

(2017) of *CNN* point out in their article "While Hitler did not use chemical weapons on the battlefield, Hitler and the Nazis used gas chambers to exterminate Jews, disabled people and others." Once again, it must be stated as a communications professional, it is important to realise that the Holocaust should never be compared to other events, past or present. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the timing of these statements was culturally relevant as Spicer made them on the day that Jewish people were celebrating the Passover.

The lead paragraph of *The New York Times* article reads as: "The White House press secretary, Sean Spicer, set off an intense backlash on Tuesday when he suggested that President Bashar al-Assad of Syria was guilty of acts worse than Hitler and asserted that Hitler had not used chemical weapons, ignoring the use of gas chambers at concentration camps during the Holocaust. Mr Spicer later apologised." The news values that are apparent are powerful elite, conflict and surprise. To further the analysis of why the news value the powerful elite was a reason for the story's selection is that Spicer was performing the legitimate function of condemning a foreign government, as mentioned in previous chapters. However, his attempt at his condemnation had illegitimate justifications which is why the news value of surprise is also at play. As said in the lead, Spicer's assertion that "Hitler did not use chemical weapons, ignoring the use of gas chambers at concentration camps". The surprise in this is that a top Trump administration Official would engage what can be described as Holocaust denial. In the second paragraph, the news values of follow-up and relevance are apparent. Spicer's comments were seeking to contextualise President Trump's decision to order a missile strike on Syria. The news value of relevance comes into play as Syria is regularly on the news agenda because of the Syrian Government's battle with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The third paragraph draws on the news value of drama as it explains that this incident was one of many that are drawing criticism and adds to the perception that "The Trump White House lacks sensitivity and has a tenuous grasp of history."

The lead paragraph of the *Fox News* article reads as: "White House press secretary Sean Spicer apologised late Tuesday after stating in his daily briefing that Adolf Hitler "didn't even sink to using chemical weapons." The news values that can be found in the lead paragraph are powerful elite and follow up. The news value of follow-up has also been considered as

this is a story about Spicer apologising for his offensive remarks and not about making them. The framing of this article aligns with the news organisation's agenda, as previously mentioned, *Fox News* must follow the Murdoch global editorial policy of reporting to be on side with conservative political actors. In the second paragraph, the news value of surprise is shown by the Spicer quote "Frankly, I mistakenly used an inappropriate and insensitive reference to the Holocaust to which there is frankly no comparison." This suggests that even Spicer was surprised and regretful at his shockingly regretful remarks.

The lead paragraph of *The Wall Street Journal* article reads as: "The White House's top spokesman issued a rare apology on Tuesday after saying that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad committed atrocities worse than Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, because the man whose genocidal regime instigated a world war and killed millions of people didn't use chemical weapons." The news value of surprise appears on two occasions. The first is when *The Wall Street Journal* comment that it is "rare" for Spicer to issue an apology, this suggests that Spicer's apology itself was surprising, as well as his offensive remark being surprising. This is shown through the use of irony "because a man whose genocidal regime instigated a world war and killed millions of people didn't use chemical weapons." This use of irony highlights Hitler's crimes against humanity and suggests to the reader that to attempt such a comparison is a grave misjudgement. The news value of follow-up is made apparent in the second paragraph which states that the apology was Spicer's "fourth statement on Tuesday about Hitler and Mr Assad." Which also further highlights the absurdity of the situation.

The lead paragraph of the *CNN* article reads as: "White House press secretary Sean Spicer apologised Tuesday after saying Adolf Hitler "didn't even sink to using chemical weapons" during World War II to shame Russia's alliance with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his use of chemical weapons." In this lead, the news values of the powerful elite, follow up and conflict can be identified. The news value of follow-up is identified through "Spicer apologised on Tuesday after saying Adolf Hitler "didn't even sink to use chemical weapons." Conflict is shown the statement "in an effort to shame Russia's alliance with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his use of chemical weapons." This highlights the conflict between the Russian and United States Governments, over Russia's alliance with Syria. An interesting finding from the content analysis about this article is that there is no subjective

comment to be found in the first three paragraphs of this article. As *CNN* is a left-wing media organisation and the Trump administration is a right-wing government, one would have thought that news organisation's agenda would have been a leading news values to publishing this story, however for this article that was not the case. The reason for this could be that Sean Spicer issued his apology for these comments in an exclusive interview on *CNN* with Wolf Biltzer.

The lead paragraph *The Associated Press* article reads as: "White House press secretary Sean Spicer apologised on Tuesday for making an 'inappropriate and insensitive' comparison to the Holocaust in earlier comments about Syrian President Bashar Assad's use of chemical weapons- remarks that drew instant rebuke from Jewish groups and critics." The news values that can be found in this lead are powerful elite, follow-up, surprise, and conflict. The news value of follow-up was key to this stories selection, as this story is framed as Spicer apologising for his 'insensitive' remarks on *CNN* in his exclusive interview with Wolf Biltzer. The news value of surprise can be noted in quoting Spicer for saying that his comments were "inappropriate and insensitive", this suggests that even Spicer himself was surprised by his own comments. The news value of conflict can be found in the phrase "-remarks that drew instant rebuke from Jewish groups and critics." It is important to highlight the term 'instant rebuke' as it showed that Spicer's claims very not only lacking in veracity but extremely controversial and emoted an intense emotional response.

The lead paragraph of the *Reuters* article reads as: "White House spokesman Sean Spicer triggered an uproar on Tuesday by saying Adolf Hitler did not use chemical weapons. He apologised after his comments drew immediate criticism on social media and elsewhere for overlooking the fact that millions of Jews were killed in Nazi gas chambers." The news values that are apparent in this lead are powerful elite and conflict. The news value of conflict is enacted through the phrasing 'triggered an uproar'. The language choice of 'triggered an uproar' suggests to the reader that the negative response to Spicer's comments was rapid and far-reaching. In the second paragraph, the news value of follow-up is also elicited. The paragraph states that Spicer made the comparison "during a discussion about the April 4 chemical weapons attack in Syria that killed 87 people. Washington has blamed the attack on the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad." This

contextualises Spicer's comments as the Syrian chemical weapons attack had been in the news media for around a week (there were six days between the chemical weapons attack and Spicer's comments), as stories of the victims of the chemical weapons attacks were a being played out in the news cycle. By referencing that 87 people were killed in the attack, the reader is subtly told that Spicer's comparison is unfounded as Spicer failed to account for the six million Jewish people that were murdered by Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party as well as, many more Romani, Homosexual and Disabled people.

#### 7.2.5 Comparisons between media organisations

It is expected that the articles would contain the same if not similar news values as they all pertain to the same three events. What is contrasting is how the news values are utilised to frame the articles. Conservative media outlets and newswire stories include the news value of follow-up. In the articles pertaining to the initial press briefing, *The Wall Street Journal* reported on Kellyanne Conway coining the term 'alternative facts' in an effort to defend Spicer's jeremiad towards the press. In the articles reporting on press briefing #30, *The Associated Press*, an objective newswire service reported on April Ryan being hired as a *CNN* contributor after her conflict with Spicer during press briefing #30. Liberal media organisations *The New York Times* and *CNN* reported on the case study events as the main focus of their news stories.

The most interesting comparison is the contrast between the reporting from *Fox News* and *The Wall Street Journal* about press briefing #36. There is a stark contrast between the how these two stories are framed, although both contain the news values of powerful elite and follow up. *Fox News* framed their news story as follow-up apology, focusing on Spicer's supposed remorse rather than his offensive comments. Only in the sixth paragraphs does the news story introduce criticism of Spicer with Nancy Pelosi's call to have Spicer fired. This quote from Pelosi is the only harsh criticism of Spicer and his comments, and is only two paragraphs out of a fourteen paragraph article. *The Wall Street Journal's* news story, unlike *Fox News* did take opportunity to criticise Spicer through the use of irony, statistics and source quotes. The news values of surprise and bad news are present in *The Wall Street*

*Journal Story*, stating that Spicer's apology was rare, as well as highlighting the fact that Spicer had previously attempted to apologise three times before he managed to clarify his statements. *The Wall Street Journal* uses statistics stating that at least 85 people died during Assad's missile attacks, although tragic, numerically the impact was smaller than the millions of human beings that died because they did not fulfil the ideals of the Hitler's Nazi regime. The different framing approaches, although owned by the same proprietor, relates to the quality of the media organisation's journalism. If McNair's (2002) political public sphere framework was applied to an American context, *The Wall Street Journal*, would be classed as an elite newspaper, whereas *Fox News* would be considered a tabloid news channel, as previously mentioned Murdoch launched the news channel in 1996 as a result of *CNN*'s overt liberal bias (McKnight, 2010). Thus it is not unexpected that *Fox News* would attempt to lessen the hurt caused by Spicer's comments by only reporting on the successful apology. *The Wall Street Journal* is the leading business focused newspaper in the United States (McKnight, 2010), the newspaper's target readership therefore is a class of people that are highly educated that want their news to contain critical analysis, with statistics and comprehensive background information. *Fox News* as a cable news channel, focuses on propagating a conservative ideology and crafts a political narrative that any individual with a basic education can comprehend (McKnight, 2010).

### 7.3 Conclusion

In sum news is a product that must adhere to economic imperatives, political news and reportage is no exception. Proprietors can often influence ideological slanting and the tone of reportage, an example of this seen in this chapter's analysis is Rupert Murdoch's global editorial policy that effects *News Corporation* and *21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox* media outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *Fox News*. The global editorial policy states that conservative political figures such as Donald Trump and Sean Spicer should be reported about favourably. It is clear from this journalistic discourse analysis that the case studies all made the news because of the news values powerful elite and conflict. All three of the case studies show Spicer at odds with the press corps over various reasons, from what they have been publishing, the questions they have been asking, to accidental anti-Semitic sentiments.



Furthermore, the framing of the news stories reveals a lot about the news organisation's agenda. For example, *Fox News* attempted to portray April Ryan as the villain of press briefing #30, whereas *The New York Times* and *CNN* portrayed Ryan as a hero worthy of her new-found fame and a new position as a political commentator on *CNN*. The proliferation of these stories could be a result of the news value of 'shareability' and the softening of political communication. As politics can be convoluted to comprehend, dramatic stories about a press secretary unexpectedly shouting and chastising the press corps is a simple story for a reader to comprehend and find quotes of opinions.

Sean Spicer's tenure as press secretary saw the White House press corps act as news reporters, pundits and commentators, chroniclers, and interrogators. It is clear that the White House press secretary see themselves as watchdogs for the public, keenly highlighting when Spicer falsified information and ridiculing Kellyanne Conway for suggesting that Spicer was simply using 'alternative facts'. The White House press corps believes that the truth is black and white, Spicer and the Trump administration believes that the truth must be searched for in a myriad of shades of grey.

## 8. Conclusion

This chapter will summarise and synthesise the findings of this thesis, discuss the significance of this research as well as acknowledge the limitations of this thesis and possible areas of further research. The first section of this chapter synthesises the thesis' findings, making the relationship between the three analysis chapters explicit and explain how they relate to the interactions between press secretary Sean Spicer and the White House press corps. The logic of this thesis' narrative was first to explore and analyse what was unique about Sean Spicer's political performance for it to warrant being the subject of headlines and news stories. Spicer's political performance was analysed through the theories of disciplined bodies, habitus, and spin. The thesis then moved onto the next chapter which analysed the political source relations between Sean Spicer and the White House press corps, and how the relationship manifested in the reportage through third-party source quotes. This was explored through the notion of political process reporting effecting the American mediated public sphere negatively. The thesis then moved onto explaining the conventions of political journalism and the updated set of news values from Harcup and O'Neill (2016). This was performed by identifying the news values that could be found in the first three paragraphs of the article and, the first source quoted. The news stories that were selected to be scrutinised were from *The New York Times*, *Fox News*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *CNN*, *The Associated Press* and *Reuters*.

The second section of this chapter will evaluate the significance of the research that this thesis has produced. The timing of thesis is current, as the planning for this thesis began in March 2017, two months after Trump was inaugurated. Although Sean Spicer resigned in July 2017, Sean Spicer still features various publications according to Google News Alerts. News stories about the most recent press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders also has reference to Sean Spicer and key moments from his tenure as White House press secretary.

The third section will discuss the limitations of this thesis and possible areas of further research. Limitations of this research arise from the research design and the focus on media perceptions, Spicer's opinions on the matters of the case studies were mediated themselves, and therefore may not have been presented in full.

## 8.1 Summary of Findings

This research endeavoured to answer the overarching question of “How did Sean Spicer become the news subject rather than the news deliverer?”

Chapters five, six, and seven of this thesis endeavoured to answer the following three sub-question respectively:

- 1) How does Sean Spicer’s political performance in press briefings affect his relationship with the White House press corps and their reportage?
- 2) How do the media organisations’ ideological biases affect the reportage of Sean Spicer's political performance?
- 3) How do news values and conventions of political journalism influence the nature of the reportage about Sean Spicer and his press briefing?

Firstly, it should be noted that the research has led to the conclusion that if Sean Spicer were not selected to be Trump's press secretary, whoever assumed the position would still have had the media's attention and ridicule. Both the academic Towle (1997) and former press secretary Fleisher assert that the President of the United States is the press secretary's first client, then the press corps is the second. Therefore, it is Spicer’s job to serve the interests of the President as he assists the members of the Press corps in performing their jobs. During the press briefings, however, Spicer did not assist the media, he degraded them because they were doing their jobs. Current press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders is also featured regularly in the news media for her contentious relationship, noting her monotonous voice as a stark contrast to Spicer’s abrasive shouting fits. This is because the relationship between the media and the President has not changed. No matter who the press secretary is, they will follow the instructions of the President in defending the Administration.

This thesis has found that the Trump administration has transformed politics from a traditional dialogical communicative encounter (like what was performed in Ancient Greece) to a monological communicative encounter (Craig, 2016). This adversary attitude towards the media can be seen as a continuation of Trump’s attitude towards the media as a

candidate. Trump treated the media as being incapable of reporting truth (Pickard, 2016) and popularising the term 'fake news' into the English vernacular. After performing a content analysis, it was found that over half (57.7 per cent) of the sample articles included a reference to press secretary Spicer's illegitimate aggressive behaviour which could be said was a push for American politics to become a monological communicative encounter. These articles were all found in the case studies of the initial press briefing and pressing briefing #30 when Spicer chastised reporter, April Ryan by instructing her to 'stop shaking your head' multiple times. Eighty-nine per cent of articles that discussed the initial press briefing mentioned Spicer's illegitimate aggressive behaviour. By analysing Spicer's Habitus and noting his Navy background and Master's degree in military strategy, it could be said that Spicer has learned to be on the defensive, which is why he launched his tenure off with an angry defence of his boss and the excitement of Trump's inauguration as the President. His habitus, however, did not provide a valid explanation for his political performance during press Briefing #30 and press Briefing #36. Ninety-five per cent of sample articles that discussed the confrontation with April Ryan during press briefing #30 mentioned Spicer's illegitimate aggressive behaviour. This incident cannot fully be explained by Spicer's habitus previous to serving in the White House he worked as the Director of Communications for the Republican National Committee and before that he served in a similar role at the Republican House Conference. In this role, he trained congressional press secretaries in media relations.

Through the theory of 'disciplined bodies', one can attempt to explain the fascination in the media of Spicer's political performance in these case studies. Spicer delivers his press briefings with his body deported in a stiff but overtly aggressive manner. Spicer's political performance is most colourfully explained in the article by *The New York Daily News*, regarding press briefing #30. *The New York Daily News* reported that Spicer "tore into reporter April Ryan for having the audacity to challenge his interpretation of facts at a news conference." There is a sense of irony to this story, as Spicer lacked an ability to control his temper in the briefing room and regularly shouted over journalists to discredit their questions and statements. In this instance, Ryan was merely shaking her head in disagreement, as Spicer began to personally attack for her possessing an agenda and disregarding facts. Ryan was merely non-verbally reacting to Spicer's accusations which one

could suggest is a merely human thing to do, when their character is being attacked. Spicer's defence of the administration not having an image problem because 'you have Russia, we don't' is illogical as an organisation's image does not necessarily reflect its reality. Even if the Muller investigations uncover that there was no illegitimate connection between the Trump Election Campaign and the Russian Government, the mere suggestion of it is damaging to the Trump administration and the Trump family, as it would be considered treasonous, and possibly lead to impeachment. This would mean that Trump would be removed as President of United States. Thus, Ryan was correct in asking how the Administration would seek to repair their image.

The relationships between individual media organisations and Spicer were dependent on the media organisations' ideologies. This thesis found that media outlets with a left-wing or liberal ideology were more likely to be critical of Spicer's political performance. Examples of these left-wing or left-centre media outlets included in the sample are *CNN*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Politico*, *Buzzfeed*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Daily News* and *The Huffington Post*. How ideology shapes the contents of a news article can be seen via the third party source quotes. This thesis chose to do a discourse analysis on articles from *CNN* and *The New York Times* as they are successful American organisations that favour a left-wing worldview. The discourse analysis was also completed on right-wing or conservative outlets *Fox News* and *The Wall Street Journal*, as well as non-biased wire services *The Associated Press* and *Reuters*. The discourse analysis found that liberal media outlets included more quotes criticising Spicer's performance than the non-biased newswires *Reuters* and *The Associated Press*, as well as conservative news organisations, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Fox News*. Criticisms of Spicer that appeared in the liberal media outlets included insisting he change his tactics in the briefing room and calling for him to be fired. Interestingly, *Fox News* did not publish any third party source quotes in their articles about the first and second case studies. In the third case study article, *Fox News* quotes a Jewish Republican representative and Defence Secretary James (Jim) Mattis in clarifying what Spicer was failing to express in press briefing #36 when comparing Bashar al-Assad to Adolf Hitler. Interestingly, *Reuters* only had one third party source quote contained in all three articles. Only Steven Goldstein, then-Executive Director of the Anne Frank Center for

Mutual Respect was quoted in the story about press briefing #36 calling for Spicer to be fired. Thus the ideology can be detected through the contents of third party source quotes.

It is noted in the thesis that process and policy are not separate discourses, they work in tandem to produce a full picture of the political landscape (McNair, 2000). However, an oversaturation of process articles hinders citizens' understanding of policy matters. From press briefing #30, the April Ryan confrontation clouded stories about the reinstatement of the Dakota Access Pipeline, which is detrimental to the environment and Indigenous Rights. Production on the pipeline was halted after President Obama issued an executive order after protests and outrage that were held throughout the world. The Pipeline will contaminate drinking water and desecrate sacred burial sites. During press briefing #36, Spicer was attempting to condemn and ridicule Russia for their alliances with Syria and other 'failed states'. However, after Spicer's false claim "someone as despicable as Hitler who didn't even sink to using chemical weapons", Spicer was the only one being condemned and ridiculed in the news media. Herman and Chomsky (2002, p. 265), discuss comparing world leaders to Hitler for political purposes. They note that Pol Pot of Cambodia was regularly likened to both Hitler and Stalin until the Vietnamese overthrew Pol Pot, then he was portrayed in the media as a character of sympathy. At the time America considered the Vietnamese 'public enemy number one'. This thesis asserts that to compare a World Leader to Adolf Hitler to gain political capital is offensive and ill-advised as it trivialises the atrocities of the Holocaust.

As discussed in chapter six, these case studies all became dominant headlines due to Harcup and O'Neill's (2016) news values of conflict, surprise, and the power elite. Each case study possesses these news values as Spicer's political performance as White House press secretary (the power elite) was controversial (surprise) and contentious (conflict) to the extent that is unprecedented for a White House Press secretary. Political news, like other genres, is not a perfect mirror of reality. It is more like a carnival fun-house of mirrors, emphasising parts in the reflection and minimising others. It can be said, that these contentious moments from the press briefing also became news due to Galtung and Ruge's (1965) news value of 'unambiguity'. It is simpler to explain a public figures outburst than to provide a longwinded explanation of the bill that President Trump will sign into law at the

Environmental Protection Agency, or the complexity of American Foreign Relations with Russia and Syria. Political journalists are regularly tasked with simplifying political events for media consumers (Neveu, 2002). News stories are structured around claims to truth and facts provided by sources named or otherwise. Hence, why third-party source quotes were so closely scrutinised in chapter five. It is because of this structure that the animosity between Spicer and the press corps over what is fact and what is fiction, which then became a frequent component in political journalism itself. Political journalism maps power, and a press secretary that does not have the faith of their press corps is somewhat powerless, and therefore it has value to be reported in the international news media as a method to hold the press secretary accountable for their actions. Sanders (2009), however, notes that without the press secretary American Political Journalism would mainly be based on conjecture, rumours and baseless slander. Despite this without political autonomy, political journalism would merely be political propaganda. The White House press corps believes that truth is merely black and white, Spicer and the Trump administration believes that the truth can be contained in a myriad of shades of grey and that there can be such a thing as 'alternative facts.'

## 8.2 Significance of research

This research is significant because, before Sean Spicer, it was not the norm for press secretaries to become the news headline as the subject, time and time again. In an opinion piece for the US periodical *PR Week* (October 1, 2009), McCurry asserted "Press briefings are the raw ingredients of news stories, not "the news". Eight years on, the Trump administration has changed this, as if it became news because the raw ingredients were rotten, like bananas being baked into a cake. Although the relationship between the press secretary and the White House press corps has historically been contentious, previous press secretaries did not have their relationship with the press corps, reported in the news like they are Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie.

The press briefing is a significant communicative encounter as it allows for the media to have in-person contact with an administration official to clarify the President's position on

current or unfolding events and discuss their daily schedule. Kumar (2008), states that the press corps is the public's link to the president on a daily basis. However, especially in Trump's case, there is an argument that Twitter is another crucial communitive tool that links the President to the public. In the case of the Trump administration, it could be said that Twitter is the public's link for the President's rambling thoughts, and the press Briefing is the public's link to the administration as an institution. The press secretary acts as a surrogate for the President, as they are busy governing the country, or golfing.

President Donald J. Trump has claimed that he has been in a running war with the media, virtually since announcing his candidacy, which the media did not take seriously. As the press briefing is a daily activity, it is the battleground for this 'running war', this could be way changes have been made to the White House press briefing. Since the Clinton administration, the White House press briefing had been televised daily after it was suggested by then-press secretary Mike McCurry, in 1995. During Sean Spicer's tenure, there were times when cameras were banned from the briefing and information from the briefing could not be broadcast until after its conclusion. There was no explanation given for this, other than White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon sending a text message to a reporter joking that they stopped televising the briefings because "Sean got fat." Jones (2012) argued that cable news networks have turned public life and politics into an entertainment spectacle. In the information age, with an instant flow of communicative messages, one could argue that the press briefing is needed and must return to its original dialogical communicative encounter that is comprised of "amicable conflict", rather than hostility.

Trump's antagonistic attitude towards the press corps and the press briefing have been exhibited in multiple tweets from his personal Twitter account @realDonaldTrump (not his official White House Twitter account). The first example is a two-part tweet series, which was published on 12 May 2017. "As a very active President with lots of things happening, it is not possible for my surrogates (Spicer and Huckabee Sanders) to stand at (the) podium with perfect accuracy!...." Followed by "...Maybe the best thing to do would be to cancel all future "press briefings" and hand out written responses for the sake of accuracy???" By cancelling the daily White House press briefing, Trump would fully convert American



political communication from a dialogical communicative encounter to a monological communicative encounter. Although, this thesis focused on the specificity of Spicer, content and discourse analyses of his briefings and the subsequent news stories, the frequency that Sander's press briefings are talked about in the news shows that Spicer's tenure was merely a catalyst of a strained, bitter relationship. It can be believed that the relationship will last an entire administration, and possibly poison the next one. This thesis argues that when a press briefing is being led by a press secretary that has respect for the press corps and their First Amendment and Fourth Estate responsibilities, it is a bastion for democracy.

However, in hostile hands such as Spicer's and the Trump administration, the press briefing becomes a weapon of mass distraction. It must be noted that the media are not faultless in this event. Donald Trump tweeted from his @realDonaldTrump Twitter account on 9 May 2018, "The Fake News is working overtime. Just reported that, despite the tremendous success we are having with the economy & all things else, 91% of the Network News about me is negative (Fake). Why do we work so hard in working with the media when it is corrupt? Take away credentials?" While it should not be assumed that all negative media about Trump and his administration is false, the statistic of the news being 91 per cent negative came from the credible Pew Research Centre (2017), as previously cited in this thesis. Sanders (2009) points out that political journalism is a product. This means that it is sold to be consumed, the media have economic pressures that they face, not just the pressures of being a voice to the people. The Trump administration and the tabloidisation of political journalism and the focus on the political process is a move that has been taken for economic survival. This sentiment was summed up best by Comedienne, Michelle Wolf at the 2018 White House Correspondents Dinner.

"You guys are obsessed with Trump. Did you use to date him? Because you pretend like you hate him, but I think you love him. I think what no one in this room wants to admit is that Trump has helped all of you. He couldn't sell steaks or vodka or water or college or ties or Eric, but he has helped you. He's helped you sell your papers and your books and your TV. You helped create this monster, and now you're profiting off of him. If you're going to profit off of Trump, you should at least give him some money, because he doesn't have any."

### 8.3 Limitations and further research

This research was designed to establish the relationship between press secretary Sean Spicer and the White House and how it is manifested in the reportage, resulting in the representation of the Spicer/press corps through the eyes of the media. Therefore, more attention was paid to Spicer's faults than to the press corps, who as previously mentioned, was not blameless in the exchanges. Hence, why transcripts of the press briefings were also analysed, as an attempt to compare a mediated representation of the briefings to the raw material.

The research design and method did result in some limitations for this thesis. Firstly, the use of case studies in this thesis allowed for the analyses to be focused, allow for accurate comparisons and contrasts, as well as better organise the collection of the sample articles for the analysis. By selecting the three was controversial moments in Sean Spicer's tenure, this thesis did not have the opportunity to assess if Spicer had moments when he could be considered a successful presidential press secretary. Nor was there an opportunity to analyse Spicer's amiable behaviour, if any.

By using content analysis, the research had the possibility to suffer from an unintended, unconscious bias from the researcher. The idea to write a thesis on the relationship between the Trump administration and the media was born out of a childhood conviction that Donald Trump was a bully to the contestants on his reality show *The Apprentice*. Therefore, what was counted as 'illegitimate aggression' in some instances may not have been counted if the researcher was more sympathetic to the Trump administration.

To incorporate media outlets across many genres of media, such as print, digital, broadcast television, cable television and radio, the researched only focused on the textual elements of articles that were posted on the media organisations' official websites. This means that if there was video or audio elements, they were not analysed. Further research, could include

an analysis of video and audio recordings to gain a deeper understanding of Spicer's political performance, with more than journalistic interpretations.

Further research could take Spicer's perspective of the incidents recorded in this thesis into account. This could be done by interviewing Sean Spicer for his perspective. The interview could also explore whom Melissa McCarthy's impression of him on *Saturday Night Live* affected his performance as press secretary. Alternatively, content and discourse analyses could be performed on Spicer's autobiography *The Briefing*, in which Spicer discusses his tenure as press secretary and his relationships with President Trump and the White House Press corps.

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spokespeople-cant-be-trusted-75256fac67a3%2F&tfw\_creator=atrutar&tfw\_site=thinkprogress

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## Appendix A: Initial Press Briefing Sample Articles

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## Appendix B: Press Briefing #30 Sample Articles

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## Appendix D: Press Briefing Transcripts

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## Appendix E: Initial Press Briefing Content Analysis Coding

Table 7: Coded Results of Initial Press Briefing

<u>Article Number</u>	<u>1. Spicer is First Quoted</u>	<u>2A. Illegitimate Aggressive Behaviour</u>	<u>3. Objective Reportage</u>	<u>4. Subjective Commentary</u>
<u>A1</u>	0	1	0	1
<u>A2</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>A3</u>	0	1	1	1
<u>A4</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>A5</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>A6</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>A7</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>A8</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>A9</u>	0	1	0	1
<u>A10</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>A11</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>A12</u>	1	0	1	0
<u>A13</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>A14</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>A15</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>A16</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>A17</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>A18</u>	=	=	=	=
<u>A19</u>	1	0	1	1
<u>A20</u>	=	=	=	=
<u>A21</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>A22</u>	1	0	0	1
<u>A23</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>A24</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>A25</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>A26</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>A27</u>	0	1	1	0
<u>A28</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>A29</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>A30</u>	0	1	0	1

## Appendix F: Press Briefing #30 Content Analysis Coding

Table 8: Coded results of Press Briefing #30

<u>Article Number</u>	<u>1. Spicer is First Quoted</u>	<u>2A. Illegitimate Aggressive Behaviour</u>	<u>3. Objective Reportage</u>	<u>4. Subjective Commentary</u>
<u>B1</u>	0	1	0	1
<u>B2</u>	1	0	1	0
<u>B3</u>	-	-	-	-
<u>B4</u>	0	1	0	1
<u>B5</u>	0	1	1	1
<u>B6</u>	-	-	-	-
<u>B7</u>	-	-	-	-
<u>B8</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>B9</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>B10</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>B11</u>	0	1	1	1
<u>B12</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>B13</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>B14</u>	1	1	0	0
<u>B15</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>B16</u>	0	1	1	0
<u>B17</u>	-	-	-	-
<u>B18</u>	-	-	-	-
<u>B19</u>	0	1	1	0
<u>B20</u>	-	-	-	-
<u>B21</u>	0	1	0	1
<u>B22</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>B23</u>	0	1	1	1
<u>B24</u>	0	1	1	1
<u>B25</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>B26</u>	0	1	0	1
<u>B27</u>	-	-	-	-
<u>B28</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>B29</u>	-	-	-	-
<u>B30</u>	-	-	-	-

## Appendix G: Press Briefing #36 Content Analysis

Table 9: Coded results of Press Briefing #36

<u>Article Number</u>	<u>1. Spicer First identified source</u>	<u>2B. Legitimate Aggressive Behaviour</u>	<u>3. Objective Reportage</u>	<u>4. Subjective Commentary</u>
<u>C1</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>C2</u>	1	0	1	0
<u>C3</u>	1	0	0	1
<u>C4</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>C5</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>C6</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>C7</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>C8</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>C9</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>C10</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>C11</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>C12</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>C13</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>C14</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>C15</u>	1	0	1	1
<u>C16</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>C17</u>	0	1	1	1
<u>C18</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>C19</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>C20</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>C21</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>C22</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>C23</u>	-	-	-	-
<u>C24</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>C25</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>C26</u>	1	1	1	1
<u>C27</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>C28</u>	1	1	0	1
<u>C29</u>	1	1	1	0
<u>C30</u>	1	1	1	1