THE ROLE OF THE PRESS AND MEDIA IN AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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Everyone knows how the American democratic system is supposed to work. The people elect candidates to office, and the elected officials serve the people's interests and wishes, while generally doing what's best for the country. Officials have an incentive to do this because they want to get elected again; their pride and ambition counteract any temptation to ignore the people's wishes or sell out their interests for personal gain. But there is a huge gap in the democratic process as just described. Voters are supposed to measure officials according to their promises and performance in office, but how can the voters find out what their elected officials have been doing?

Though barely mentioned in the Constitution, the institution that fills this gap is what today we call the "news media": newspapers for most of the republic's history, more recently joined by various forms of electronic journalism. Most of the American revolutionaries understood the need for some lines of communication that allowed the people to express their views and to receive information about what was being done on their behalf. That is why most state constitutions and the federal Bill of Rights provided protection to the press, and why later legislation and court decisions have given them special privileges, including discounted postage rates and extensive access to government officials and legislative proceedings. Simply put, the media have been granted a special place at the political table because the publicity they provide allows democracy to function.

The Myth of Media Domination in Twentieth-Century Politics

Unfortunately, this special place has not been a beloved one. To many, if not most, politicians and citizens over the centuries, the media have seemed an overwhelming and dangerous force that abuses its special privileges, while trying to impose a political agenda of its own. This view became increasingly widespread in the late twentieth century. The title of a college textbook asks, *Do the Media Govern?* Between print, radio, television, and the worldwide web, news outlets pervade American life to a degree that was unthinkable as recently as the 1970s. Network anchormen and cable talk-show hosts are far better known than the leaders of Congress or presidential primary candidates. The vast corporations that own most media outlets dwarf the national political parties in size, wealth, reach, and audience. While voter participation continues to decline, exposure to some product of the news-entertainment complex is almost universal, leaving politicians and parties to scramble for the attention of reporters and producers if they want their names put before the voters.

In the area of presidential elections, the argument was that the media had taken over the presidential nominating process. Reforms imposed after the chaotic 1968 election created a nomination system almost wholly based on primaries, and undermined the ability of party leaders even to screen potential candidates, much less choose party nominees. With the party organizations weakened, candidates became self-selected entrepreneurs, while reporters, editors, and commentators got to decide which candidates were serious contenders. The media became "The Great Mentioner," making or breaking candidacies simply by paying attention or not. Those named as frontrunners or "also-rans" before an election then got to play the "expectations game," in which primary victories or defeats were declared not by who came in first, but by which candidates exceeded or fell short of the finish that the media had projected for them.

In 1976, Georgia governor Jimmy Carter placed first in New Hampshire, after winning only 28 percent of the vote with two other leading candidates not even running. Nevertheless, because the relatively unknown Carter had far surpassed media expectations, he was a given a tremendous publicity blitz, including the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek,* and he rode this "political miracle" to the nomination and the presidency. Carter later found that the media could take away what it had given. He received terrible press coverage during much of his presidency, including a hostage crisis in Iran that lasted throughout the 1980 election year and which first sparked the packaged, saturation-coverage style of news reporting that soon became the model for the 24-hour cable news networks. In later years, media coverage and the expectations game have run figures such as senators Edward Kennedy, Gary Hart, Paul Tsongas, and John McCain up the presidential flagpole—and then back down again.

The number of ultimately unsuccessful candidates on this list suggests a huge problem with the idea that the media control modern American politics. 'While mass communication forms the primary link between candidates and voters, and while politicians are more obsessed with their press coverage than ever, the modern media's "political power" does not really fit our usual ideas of that term. Typically, the kind of power that politicians and interest groups seek involves the ability to exercise control, to direct government policy, and to guide events toward some particular goal. The news media are more like the weather—an atmosphere that obstructs, restrains, or destroys without purpose, motive, intention, or plan—a power to be sure, but a random one that nothing can really control (least of all itself).

Since the 1960s, the loudest complaints about the power of the media have come from conservative Republicans. Despite the fact that most media outlets are owned by corporations and wealthy people—the bulwarks of the Republican Party—conservatives claim to believe that the media are biased against them and bent on defeating conservative politicians and causes. They cite surveys showing that national-level journalists are heavily liberal, Democratic, and secular in their personal beliefs, and far more so than the general population. Life-long press hater Richard Nixon sent out his vice president, Spiro Agnew, to attack the national media as "a tiny and closed fraternity of privileged men, elected by no one,“ while the 'White House itself planned to retaliate against unfavorable coverage and to plug leaks by using the FCC, FBI, CIA, and IRS,

along with a special team of intelligence operatives called the "Plumbers." (This operation eventually resulted in the Watergate scandal that brought Nixon down.) Conservative attitudes have changed little since Nixon's time. "'We are not going to let the media steal this election," declared 1996 Republican candidate Bob Dole a few days before the election. "The country belongs to the people, not *The New York Times."*

The proof, or rather the disproof, of any concerted or purposeful media power is in the election results. Since criticism of the "liberal media" first became prevalent, political trends have been uniformly conservative and Republican in direction. The presidential candidates worst ravaged by media coverage have tended to be centrist Democrats like Edmund Muskie, Gary Hart, and Bill Clinton. Clinton's first campaign became famous for trying to avoid the traditional media, instead seeking out direct encounters with voters (like call-in shows and a "town meeting" on MTV). Meanwhile, the candidates who complained loudest about liberal bias have been among the most successful in recent history: Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.

Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and the Rise of Newspaper Politics

While the modern media pervade our lives and provide the environment in which our conduct is portrayed, they can hardly be said to exert much real power. A longer view reveals that the media's political influence has actually been in decline for more than a century. Commenting on the erroneous network calls of the 2000 presidential election, historian Allen Lichtman noted on MSNBC that the news media had "inserted itself as part of the political process rather than as observers or analysts of it." In the nineteenth century, the press did not have to insert itself: It was already there, not just influencing the political system through its mistakes and habits, but acting as a basic working component of the process, staffed by journalists who were themselves politicians.

It is not clear exactly what role the founders intended the press to play when they gave the newspaper industry its special protections and privileges. John Adams, Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and others had made heavy use of the press in the movement for independence from Great Britain, but they had little experience with the sort of partisan electoral politics that would develop later. They saw newspapers primarily as conduits that allowed political leaders to express their views and influence the people and each other.

Most early newspapers were only four pages long. With half of that space often devoted to advertising, newspapers contained little that looks like "news" to the modern reader. There were no headlines and only the most rudimentary organization. Instead, an almost undifferentiated mass of tiny type presented a miscellaneous selection of what would be considered the "raw material" of news as we know it today: not "stories," but speeches, government documents, letters, and long political essays. Newspapers were generally published by printers—craftsmen who were too poor to pay their writers and too busy getting ink on paper to do any systematic newsgathering themselves. Desperate for material, they copied from other newspapers, jotted down rumors they heard at the

tavern, and frequently published articles that had been slipped under their door in the middle of the night.

Yet these dull rags came to be seen, in the words of minister Samuel Miller, as "immense moral and political engines," and even the printers themselves came to play a powerful role in politics. The founders began their new nation by assuming that all they needed to do with newspapers was to provide the people with basic information about the government's activities, such as what laws had been passed and a presidential speech or two. It seemed more than enough when, in 1789, Boston businessman John Fenno appeared in the nation's capital and started *The Gazette of the United States,* a would-be national newspaper intended to "endear the general government to the people." When fundamental disagreements broke out among the leading founders in the early 1790s, however, *The Gazette of the United States* began to seem simply a propaganda organ for a corrupt government. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson became convinced that treasury secretary Alexander Hamilton was leading President Washington and the country in a dangerously pro-British and anti-democratic direction. Yet Jefferson could not create an opposition himself and still remain within the administration. Needing a surrogate, Jefferson arranged a "no-work" job in his office for journalist Philip Freneau, who created the *National Gazette*—a newspaper designed to lead the public charge against Hamilton's policies. It was in the *National Gazette*'s pages that the idea of an opposition political party was first floated.

While the *National Gazette* folded in 1793, it set a precedent that would be followed again and again in the next century, as politicians and parties looked to newspapers as their primary public combatants in the bruising battles that came after the Jefferson-Hamilton split. The Philadelphia *Aurora,* founded by a grandson of Benjamin Franklin, took over as the leading Jeffersonian, or Democratic-Republican, paper, and around it developed a loose national network of local newspapers that spread the opposition movement's ideas. The *Aurora* and other papers vehemently attacked President Adams's administration (1797–1801); Adams and other Federalists responded by passing the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798, which sought to crush this network. But the move backfired. So many printers, politicians, and citizens were outraged by the Federalists' blatant attempt to destroy press freedom for political gain that the Democratic-Republican newspaper network grew even bigger, despite the fact that all of the most prominent opposition papers were raided and numerous editors jailed or ruined.

Jefferson's victory in the election of 1800–1—the first peaceful transfer of power between parties in world history—was a watershed in the growth of this new partisan press. A wide range of observers and participants—from Jefferson to the defeated Federalists, to European visitors and the printers themselves credited the newspaper network with effecting this great political change. From that time onward, it was more or less accepted that no serious political movement or presidential candidacy could afford to be without a newspaper network like Jefferson's. Without newspapers, a group of politicians or activists were nothing but "uninfluential atoms," one of Aaron Burr's supporters wrote, with "no rallying point" or visible public presence.

As valuable as newspaper networks were, financing them was always a problem, since the basic purpose of seriously partisan newspapers was building political support rather than making money. Party supporters were urged to buy subscriptions (the main way that most newspapers were sold), but this was rarely enough to keep outlets going in every small town. The difference was made up by politicizing the process of printing government documents. After the election of 1800, the first move of any party, faction, candidate, or movement would be to establish new newspapers or recruit existing ones for their cause.

In the chaotic race to succeed James Monroe in 1824, all four major hopefuls banked on newspaper support: War secretary John C. Calhoun "had an understanding" with the *Washington Republican,* while Secretary of State John Quincy Adams looked to the *National Journal.* Treasury secretary William Crawford had the *Washington Gazette* in his camp, in addition to several of the most widely read papers in other regions, including the New York *National Advocate* and Thomas Ritchie's *Richmond Enquirer,* the "national" newspaper of the South. Speaker of the House Henry Clay tried to start his own Washington paper but failed, relying instead on a network of papers back home in the Ohio Valley and the partial support of the *National Intelligencer,* the major organ of the Jefferson and Madison administrations.

If there was ever a media-made president, it was undoubtedly Andrew Jackson. Indeed, Jackson was to some degree the king of all media. A popular biography and a hit song ("The Hunters of Kentucky") about his war exploits first brought Jackson to national prominence, while Pennsylvania newspaper editors John McFarland and Stephen Simpson "invented" Jackson as a serious presidential candidate in 1823. When John Quincy Adams won the election of 1824 over Jackson with an alleged "corrupt bargain" that made Clay secretary of state, Jackson supporters mounted a newspaper campaign that surpassed even what had been done for Jefferson. Ritchie's *Enquirer* threw in its support and a new pro-Jackson journal, the *United States Telegraph* edited by Duff Greene, appeared in Washington. By 1828, every major city and town had a Jacksonian paper.

Jackson's presidency marked a major turning point in the history of media politics. Understanding exactly the role that newspaper editors played in his campaigns, Jackson did what Jefferson had felt he could not—publicly expressing his gratitude to the newspapers that supported him by appointing at least seventy journalists to federal offices, and by allowing several key editors to play crucial roles in his administration. Among the leading members of Jackson's "kitchen cabinet," the group of unofficial advisers that some historians have called the first White House staff, were three newspaper editors including Francis Preston Blair, a Kentuckian brought in to edit a new pro-administration paper, the *Washington Globe,* after the *Telegraph*'s loyalty had been called into question.

After Jackson, more and more newspapers became involved in each succeeding campaign, and more and more editors in each succeeding administration, with similar trends occurring in most states. By the 1830s, journalists were starting to run for office in

their own right. Hundreds would serve in Congress, and thousands more in positions from postmaster and state legislator to the highest posts in the land. This convergence of parties and the press, or "newspaper politics," was most evident in the period between the turn of the nineteenth century and the Civil War; but it remained strong in many rural areas until the twentieth century.

Big Money and the Press Gang: The Heyday of Newspaper Politics

While always remaining close, the media-politics relationship nevertheless changed dramatically during the nineteenth century. Like everything else in American life, "newspaper politics" was severely affected by the market revolution that began during the 1820s. Vast amounts of money flowed into the political system as campaigning expanded and business leaders sought the myriad benefits that government had to offer. Banks, real estate speculators, and transportation companies (especially railroads) led the way—seeking land grants, financial aid, lenient laws, and favorable decisions on their interests.

The new campaign money flowed especially into the newspaper business. It became increasingly common for local party leaders to publish special newspapers that were wholly devoted to elections and existed only for the duration of the campaign, typically from the early summer to November of a presidential election year. The practice began in 1828 with a few pro- and anti-Jackson papers, including *Truth's Advocate* and *Monthly Anti-Jackson Expositor,* the publication that spread the tale of Jackson's bigamous marriage (rumors, the president believed, that killed his wife). It exploded during the infamous "Log Cabin" campaign of 1840 when the new Whig Party, armed with generous funds from the business interests that tended to favor it over the Democrats, created nearly 100 campaign newspapers across the country as part of its effort to give their candidate, Virginia-born William Henry Harrison, the image of a hard-drinking frontiersman.

Simultaneously with the rise of campaign newspapers, new technologies and business models developed that undermined the newspapers' close relationship with the political parties, at least at the high end. The basic units of the newspaper networks that had elected Jefferson and Jackson in the early 1800s were local weekly newspapers printed on hand presses and sold primarily by subscription; they could not (and did not) have circulations of more than a few thousand. The Industrial Revolution brought mass production and mechanization into the newspaper business, which allowed a new kind of newspaper to arise in the major urban centers in the 1830s and 1840s, printed on steam-driven presses by the hundreds of thousands and sold directly to readers on the street for a penny or two a copy. These new "penny papers" were the first American newspapers to focus systematically on reporting the news, which now included such relatively nonpolitical matters as crime and social gossip.

Despite their emphasis on news reporting, the new mass-circulation papers were just as partisan as the local party journals. Outrageous political rhetoric became one more

way to entertain readers and boost circulation, and the political independence that the "penny press" bragged about often came down to the ability to support a president or policy ardently one week, only to turn around and bash it just as hard the next.

The new mass-circulation papers bragged that they had both opened up newspaper reading to the masses for the first time and made the press a greater force for political and cultural democracy than ever before. But there was one important way in which this was not true at all: the role of money. Local weekly newspapers were relatively cheap and easy to start. Thus, the local partisan press could be an avenue for relatively ordinary young men to pursue their political beliefs and ambitions. Starting a mass-circulation newspaper, on the other hand, required huge investments in plant, equipment and employees—and that meant banks, investors, and a fundamentally profit-oriented mentality. Although the press was still the only means available to the government and politicians for communicating with the mass of voters, at the highest levels this political role was no longer its reason for being. Grass-roots democracy suffered as a result.

The system of contracting out the federal government's printing business to party organs came under attack during the late 1850s for its corruption and inefficiency, leading to major reforms under President Abraham Lincoln in the 1860s. Yet the days of direct journalistic influence in politics hardly ended with the coming of the Civil War—far from it. State and local governments still contracted out their printing to partisan publishers, and journalists were still elected and appointed to office in droves. Three members of Lincoln's cabinet were journalists, and they were very much the tip of an iceberg of journalist-officeholders.

The 1860s and '70s were, in fact, the heyday of what historian Mark Wahlgren Summers has called the "Press Gang," a gaggle of celebrity newspaper publishers who dominated public discourse in many major cities. Virtually all newspapers, including an elegant new Republican journal called *The New York Times* (actually founded in 1851), continued to pitch themselves to readers of a particular political viewpoint, even as they evolved toward the modern newspaper format with its headlines, pictures, and multiple sections organized by subject matter. In an era of intense partisanship, audiences might not have tolerated or understood genuine objectivity, and there were so many competing newspapers published in most sizable places that some sort of market differentiation was needed. (For instance, the small city of Sedalia, Missouri, population 15,000, supported 3 daily and at least 6 weekly newspapers in 1904.) Yet partisanship clearly became increasingly problematic in the commercial newsgathering press. Publications that purported to present comprehensive, reliable information lost much of their value when they too obviously exaggerated or slanted. At the same, the format of seemingly factual, staff-written "stories" allowed partisan politics to be practiced much more insidiously than it could in a reprinted speech or opinionated essay—through selectively reporting one wording headlines in ways that helped one candidate or another.

It was the "independent," news-reporting press, in fact, that sponsored the most audacious venture ever attempted in newspaper politics: the Liberal Republican

movement of 1872. A number of the independent papers had become bitterly critical of Reconstruction and the first Grant administration (1869–73), and were crusading for “reform” and publicizing a number of real and fictional scandals. Most of these papers leaned Republican; but by the spring of 1872, the independents joined forces to organize a so-called Liberal nomination for the presidency to challenge Grant’s reelection, or possibly to replace whoever was nominated by the war-decimated Democrats. Led by a “Quadrilateral” of newspapermen that included the editors of leading dailies in New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis, the Liberals had little in the way of a party organization behind them. Banking on their newspapers’ supposed power over public opinion to get them through, the Quadrilateral nominated the most famous of all the celebrity editors, Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune,* and received the Democratic nomination as well.

The 1872 election developed as a smack-down between Greeley and the independent publishers (who were mostly renegade Republicans) on the one side and the regular Republican Party organization and party press on the other. Also arrayed against Greeley was most of the regular Democratic Party press, which resented being saddled with a former abolitionist and founding Republican as its nominee. The press lords themselves became an issue in the campaign, as their corruption and inconsistencies were held up to scrutiny, just as they usually did to officeholders. Once his personal political ambitions had become clear, Greeley’s standing as a high-minded promoter of good causes plummeted —along with his newspaper’s circulation.

The Decline of the Party Press

The 1872 debacle soured many big-city commercial newspaper publishers on such direct, large-scale interventions in partisan politics. Political scandals and crusades could still build circulation, but the seeds of journalistic disenchantment with party politics were blooming. However, it would be the politicians as much as the journalists who forced the press to disengage from party politics. Presidential candidates and party leaders had never liked kowtowing to powerful editors, and their frustration with having their reputations dirtied or words twisted was perennial. As political parties and presidential campaigns became better organized and financed in the late nineteenth century, they increasingly tried to bypass the press. Like the giant “trusts” organized to control whole industries, parties and candidates attempted to monopolize political communication. Candidates went out on speaking tours—a rarity before the turn of the century—to reach the voters in person. Newly centralized national party committees created and distributed their own literature, some of which was printed verbatim in party newspapers and, increasingly, sent directly to voters. Later, the central committees turned to the new techniques of the advertising profession. Facing the brilliant orator William Jennings Bryan in 1896, the Republicans used boatloads of cash from their industrialist supporters to advertise their colorless nominee, William McKinley, “as if he were a patent medicine,” said Theodore Roosevelt. Republicans’ success in using these tactics to sell McKinley to working-class Democratic voters set a new precedent for the media politics of the twentieth century.

Centralization and advertising were also two of the methods employed in the early 1900s to lower the level of intensity and disorder in American politics. Along with such Progressive reforms as voter registration and the secret or "Australian" ballot, the new political style made voting a more difficult, private, and intellectual activity. Individual voters were now expected to weigh the facts for themselves and make a careful, rational decision, rather than merely follow the dictates of their party, neighborhood, or ethnic group. While this model of voting was consistent with the values of the educated middle classes, it tended to turn off or close out poorer and less-educated voters, with the result that rates of election participation dropped sharply. The new, more rational style of voting also had its effect on the newspaper business. Wealthy publishers like Joseph Pulitzer helped found new journalism schools at the turn of the century. These schools tried to foster a sense of professionalism in news reporting, by teaching journalists that their highest "calling" was to discover and present the facts dispassionately and objectively, like scientists.

This approach emerged in self-conscious opposition to the last wave of strongly partisan newspaper journalism, personified by the larger-than-life William Randolph Hearst. As the most notorious purveyor of what was known as "yellow journalism," Hearst probably did more than any other single publisher to destroy the remaining prestige of the partisan press. While developing such staples of the modern entertainment-oriented newspaper as the comics pages, heavy sports coverage, color illustration, and the Sunday supplement, Hearst practiced what he called "THE JOURNALISM THAT ACTS"—sending reporters out to stage stunts and pursue undercover investigations and honoring "no discernible boundaries between the vocations of publisher and politician." By the 1890s, this was already a long tradition in American journalism; but Hearst pursued it in an extreme fashion, at a time when other journalists were backing away from partisanship. He ran his editorials and vicious cartoons on the front page. Boasting about his controlling influence over the course of political events, Hearst claimed that his *New York Journal* had caused the Spanish-American War of 1898. Though still a political neophyte, Hearst used his newspapers and wealth to cast himself as a serious contender for governor of New York and the Democratic nomination for president in the early 1900s; he won two terms in Congress (where he rarely attended sessions) as a consolation prize.

The incident that probably drove a political "stake through the heart" of both Hearst and the partisan press was the assassination of President William McKinley. Almost alone among the urban Democratic press, the Hearst papers had fervently supported William Jennings Bryan against McKinley in 1896 and 1900. McKinley and his campaign manager, Cleveland industrialist Mark Hanna, were vilified. Color and front-page cartoons depicted a grossly fat Hanna in a suit covered in dollar signs, or Hanna as a governess with McKinley and his 1900 running mate, Theodore Roosevelt, as children (with an obese man labeled "The Trusts" as their father). When President McKinley was shot not long after his reelection, the assassin, factory worker Leon Czolgosz, gave as his motive a Hearstian view of McKinley as the enemy of working people; the Hearst newspapers were widely blamed for the crime. Waiting for a key moment in Hearst's political career, McKinley's successor Teddy Roosevelt used his

bully pulpit to denounce the "Hearst disease," letting it be known publicly that he believed Hearst had killed McKinley by calling up "the dark and evil spirits of malice and greed, envy and sullen hatred."

The Airwaves as Political Atmosphere: The Emergence of Electronic Media Politics

By the time electronic news media came along, open and purposeful partisan journalism was mostly a dead letter. The beginnings can be dated to 1920, when pioneering Pittsburgh radio station KDKA broadcast the election results from a shack atop the Westinghouse factory building. It was a moment of symbolic transition in the history of political journalism. The major party candidates in 1920 were two veteran newspaper editors, Democrat James M. Cox of the *Dayton News* and Republican Warren G. Harding of the *Marion Star,* In contrast to Horace Greeley's 1872 run, the 1920 candidates' backgrounds in partisan journalism were treated as relics of the past: Cox had aggressively modernized his paper and presented himself as a businessman, while Harding's background in the small-town partisan press became one of the factors that soon turned him into an embarrassing figure who represented a corrupt, bygone era.

Politicians cast a wary eye on the electronic media, and took steps to prevent it from the becoming the partisan force that newspapers had once been. As radio developed, one congressman worried, "American politics will be largely at the mercy of those who operate these stations," and similar fears would soon be directed at television. Unlike the pages of a newspaper, which were considered private property, the airwaves were treated as public space that could only be licensed by private businesses. Beginning with the Radio Act of 1927, serving the public need for political communication became one requirement of these licenses. The "equal-time rule" embodied in the Radio Act and subsequent legislation forced radio and television networks and stations to offer opposing candidates airtime to respond to any time another candidate received, and to sell time (including ads) to all candidates at rates equal to what other advertisers paid. Added to this were restrictions on editorializing, and, eventually a Federal Communications Commission policy known as the Fairness Doctrine, which demanded that broadcast outlets provide programs addressing issues of public importance and provide contrasting points of view when they did so.

Despite these precautions, the greatest beneficiaries of the rise of electronic media were established politicians and the two major political parties. Advertising on television ratcheted up the cost of political campaigns, making it less and less likely that parties, leaders, or ideas without heavy financial backing would be able to get a hearing. The major exceptions to prevailing practices that allowed politicians to appear only in paid time or news reports were presidential speeches, the party conventions and televised debates; but in those cases, only the two major parties were usually allowed to participate. Incumbents, and especially incumbent presidents, benefited even more. Broadcast news coverage and the government's ability to commandeer air-time for speeches, press conferences, and hearings vastly increased the public exposure that major

office holders received. Presidents could go on the air whenever they wanted, usually on all networks at once, with the opposition party able to respond formally only to the annual State of the Union address. Electronic media allowed presidents to become familiar household faces and voices for the first time, creating a false but powerful sense of intimacy between the chief executive and the people. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the first president to fully exploit this new resource with his radio "fireside chats." The official farthest removed from the people thus became the one that the people knew best—often the only elected official they "knew." The president became the living embodiment of the American nation. Partly thanks to this phenomenon, the era of electronic journalism has witnessed the greatest increase in presidential power in our history.

Talk Radio, Cable Television, and the Return of Partisan Journalism

While the revolutions in electronic media at the end of the 20th century brought less political change than might have been expected, they did foster some of the first truly new departures in media politics. The initial catalyst was the wave of deregulation that began in the late 1970s. The tremendous expansion of cable television in the 1980s allowed the creation of the nation's first 24-hour news network, CNN, and undermined the idea that airtime was a scarce resource needing to be reserved for public use. Giving in to long-standing opposition from media companies and the "free market" ideology of Reagan administration, the FCC scrapped the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 and opened the way for a new type of extremely partisan programming. Radio moved first, when Sacramento radio personality Rush Limbaugh was given a nationally syndicated show in 1988. Featuring a novel talk-radio format focused not on guests or callers but the blustery Limbaugh's right-wing opinions, the show had acquired 2.4 million listeners (dubbed "Dittoheads" for their automatic concurrence with everything Rush said) on 480 stations by the time of the 1992 election. Limbaugh revolutionized AM radio as legions of imitators appeared and whole stations devoted themselves to conservative talk; he also became a potent factor in national Republican politics. Conservative talk radio was one of the few electronic media sources demonstrated to have a direct impact on voter preferences, helping create a conservative Republican tilt in Limbaugh's core demographic of fans, 18-to-49-year-old white males, that has lasted until the present day.

In the 1990s, spurred on by the GOP's two galling defeats at the hands of Bill Clinton, the new, largely conservative partisan journalism pioneered by Limbaugh found ample opportunities to expand. Cable television's need for cheap but compelling programming was one important opening. Cable news executives discovered that a cheap, easy, and lively way to fill their air-time, without the expense of paying reporters, was the political talk show. Instead of the somnolent chin-stroking sessions among Washington columnists previously featured on Sunday mornings and public television, cable talk shows emphasized quick, loud, often angry exchanges of conflicting opinions, as popularized by the "Point-Counterpoint" feature that had appeared at the end of the CBS show *60 Minutes* during the 1970s (and earned memorable parodies on the early *Saturday Night Live*). The style had first resurfaced in altered formats during the 1980s, on the syndicated *McLaughlin Group* and CNN's *Crossfire* show. Guests of widely-varying qualifications could be brought on in liberal-conservative pairs and invited to

argue with each other, with the shouting matches interspersed with provocative video clips and perhaps a monologue from the host. A vast number of new opportunities for conservative talkers was thus created, especially as additional cable news networks appeared in the mid-1990s: the business-oriented CNBC, America's Talking (later changed to MSNBC), and most importantly, right-wing Australian newspaper publisher Rupert Murdoch's Fox News Channel. Fox debuted in 1996, led by longtime GOP media advisor Roger Ailes and staffed with conservative journalists raided from other media organizations. Though Rush Limbaugh himself was unable to make the transition to television, Fox found Limbaugh-like personalities in tabloid television journalist Bill O'Reilly and regional radio host Sean Hannity, self-styled populists who specialized in trumped-up outrage at whatever Hollywood production, "liberal" policy, or statement by a Democratic, minority, or foreign public figure happened to come to their attention.

While trumpeting itself as the only "fair and balanced" television news network, Fox like other conservative media outlets was more concerned with redressing the perceived past imbalances of the liberal media through aggressive slanting and open partisanship of the type that conservatives had long accused the mainstream media of practicing for the left. Fox became the core of a new powerful conservative media counter-establishment that included new conservative magazines (*The Weekly Standard*), a steady stream of quickie attack books on the Clintons and other Democratic politicians, a greatly expanded roster of conservative newspaper columnists, and think-tanks full of conservative issue experts for the other outlets to draw on. Despite the Fox news slogan, the new right-wing media machine was notable for the high levels of cohesion and coordination among the various outlets, conservative advocacy groups, and the Republican party, who together spread particular partisan arguments, phrases, and images with a speed, incessancy, and rigor undreamt by the old party press at its zenith. The considerable resources of this conservative archipelago were bent toward keeping an almost non-stop series of scandals going throughout Clinton's time in office.

The older, more mainstream media was also heavily influenced by the new partisan journalism. The success of Fox forced other TV news networks to move right to compete with it, or put more right-wing voices on the air. Even the two pillars of allegedly liberal print journalism, *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, took noticeable steps toward addressing and incorporating conservative viewpoints. Perhaps more importantly, the reigning point-counterpoint format allowed even the flimsiest of partisan talking points to gain a respectful hearing and frequent repetition. In allowing space to mendacious, neo-McCarthyite hate-mongers like columnist Anne Coulter, mainstream media outlets clung to rote notions of balance, and generally refused to challenge or investigate the claims that were made.

Remarkable as it was, the new partisan media was like the old party press in being much more effective at mobilizing and motivating a hard core of supporters, and confusing enemies, than it was at mass persuasion or public policy. It never succeeded in significantly denting the popularity of its greatest target, Bill Clinton, and even Clinton's little-loved understudy, Al Gore, still won a narrow majority of the popular vote in 2000. Yet the new conservative media's powers of mobilization and message control gave it a

heavy influence over how debates were framed and what stories were covered. George W. Bush's two presidential victories and the early years of his war in Iraq showed the new conservative media at its peak of its influence. During the 2000 election crisis, the Democrats badly needed the sort of reliable, narrative-reinforcing mouthpiece that the Republicans had, but instead found themselves on the defensive during the crisis as they would be throughout the first decade of the 21st century. In 2000 and after, political news was often turned into a funhouse mirror that seemed to reflect images that were almost the opposite of reality. Cable news talkers repeated, and significant numbers of Americans were convinced, that the boring, steady Al Gore was a flip-flopping teller of tall tales. Bush evaded the stigma of illegitimacy that should have been the lot of a court-installed president, and was later transformed into a kind of war hero whose actions were above criticism, even when an actual war hero (John Kerry) was running against him. The "swift-boating" of Kerry, in which the candidate's war service was turned from his greatest strength into a quasi-scandal that threw his veracity, patriotism, and physical courage into question, all without benefit of any new or damning information, was undoubtedly the right-wing noise machine's greatest achievement.

Every Man His Own Pundit: American Politics and the Internet

The other new media departure during the 1990s, the rise of the Internet, was a more bipartisan phenomenon, and so far a much less potent one than some readers might suppose. In the early years, almost all of the Internet's news content originated with traditional print and broadcast outlets, as most of it still does today. Political web sites chiefly aggregate and comment on news from other journalistic sources. One important early Web site, the Drudge Report, did play a critical role in the conservative media machine that dogged Bill Clinton. More provocateur than journalist, Matt Drudge's site broke down some of the previous filters keeping rumors and other unsourced hearsay from being reported as news. Drudge got the Monica Lewinsky scandal rolling by releasing information that *Newsweek* had found too scurrilous and flimsy to print.

As the Internet developed, it turned out to have a tendency similar to talk radio and cable television: the propagation of strident opinion and partisan talking points rather than hard information. The revolutionary decentralization of information predicted by Internet enthusiasts never fully transpired, but at the turn of the century the advent of the weblog or 'blog, a sort of online diary or stream of commentary, turned anyone with a computer into a potential pundit with unlimited space. Conservatives such as Andrew Sullivan and the "Instapundit" (Glenn Reynolds) were among the pioneers of blogging, but it was also in the so-called "blogosphere" that liberals first began to achieve some degree of parity in the new partisan journalism. While liberal talk radio floundered and cable took its cues from Fox, liberal sites like DailyKos, Atrios, and Talking Points Memo developed large, participatory readerships. Collectively they were able to counter some of the right's voluminous propaganda output, in a way that the mainstream media had largely refused to, and provide some leftward pressure on conventional journalists to counterbalance what had long been exerted from the right. Kos in particular also moved quickly into directly supporting liberal candidates for office.

In presidential politics, the liberal Internet (or "netroots") scored only limited achievements. Internet activism fueled the insurgent candidacy of Vermont governor Howard Dean in 2004, but online enthusiasm did not translate into Iowa votes, and a suspicious mainstream media was only too happy to pounce on Dean once he faltered, especially with a film clip where Dean appeared to be "screaming" at an Iowa audience. Dean and later John Kerry were also heavily supported by independent "527" organizations like MoveOn.org that operated largely through the Web, recruiting get-out-the-vote volunteers and sponsoring commercials too pugnacious for regular Democrats to run.

Another form of partisan journalism that was prominent in 2004, one the left had almost to itself, was the documentary film, a genre that had become much less stuffy through the use of music and humor and more financially viable because of the flourishing independent film sector and skyrocketing DVD sales. Michael Moore's theatrical hit *Fahrenheit 9/11* was the most widely seen political documentary, but it was only one of many nonfiction films criticizing the Iraq War and the Bush administration. While emotionally cathartic for many Americans who were deeply upset by the country's direction under Bush, the frenetic counter-media efforts of 2004 came to very little electorally. Probably the most effective form of liberal media programming was an irreverent but serious-minded late-night comedy show, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, a satire of cable news that many younger Americans acknowledged was their main source of news. A spin-off featuring *Daily Show* cast member Stephen Colbert as a satirical conservative pundit came to be just as popular.

Over the long-run, the liberal Internet has proved most useful as a fundraising and recruitment device, tapping into a large pool of small but highly motivated donors and volunteers that allowed Democratic candidates to keep pace with the GOP's long-standing fundraising advantages based on the conservative party's greater appeal to corporations, the wealthy, and evangelical Christians. While his ultimate success probably owed more to the collapse of the GOP's popularity and the American economy during 2008, Barack Obama's presidential campaign used the Internet spectacularly well in its record-setting fundraising effort and in bypassing established media institutions to connect directly to voters. With little of the fanfare that marked the online campaigning of 2004, the Obama campaign was able to present itself in a way that was extremely congenial to younger voters who had grown up with the Internet. Particularly effective was Obama's use of the new online video technologies, such as YouTube, that had developed with the spread of broadband Internet connections. Supporters and the merely curious were able to watch virtually all of Obama's public appearances, on their computers and in their own time, and easily find his stated positions on almost any conceivable topic.

The 2008 national election results temporarily threw into question the long-term influence of right-wing partisan journalism. Barack Obama used the Internet to work around cable news networks and the rest of the conservative noise machine, and his growing popularity seemed to convince some media executives that experiments in more genuine balance might be tried. During 2008, at least, the 3rd-place cable news channel

MSNBC seemed to be moving into a liberal niche in the market, with left-oriented hosts Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow emerging as alternatives to O'Reilly, Hannity, and the rest. True balance would be desirable, because the new media, cable television and the Internet, are likely to find their roles in presidential politics increasing rather than decreasing in the future. The newspaper industry's long decline was accelerated by the 2008-2009 recession, with the prospect of major American cities losing their last remaining daily newspaper.

At the same time, conservative partisan journalism found itself quickly on the comeback trail. The far right's intense reaction to the Obama presidency, embodied in the so-called Tea Party Movement, helped make 2009 one of Fox News's best rating years ever.

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