Preaching to the Choir or Converting the Flock: Presidential Communication Strategies in the Age of Three Medias

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On September 9, 2009, President Barack Obama delivered a primetime television address on healthcare reform to a joint session of Congress. According to nielsenwire.com, over 32 million Americans watched the president’s appeal on TV. Less than two weeks later, on September 21, 2009, Obama took to the stage of the *Late Show With David Letterman*, only the second time a sitting U.S. president had appeared on a network late-night comedy show.¹ This appearance – Obama’s fifth on the Letterman show – capped an intensive media push by the President to promote health care reform, a push that included interviews on five Sunday news shows the previous day, spanning ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, and the Spanish language network Univision. That same month, Obama’s Internet team sent weekly emails on healthcare (followed by two-per week the in October) to the roughly 13 million individuals in its famed email database.

Obama’s media frenzy was notable not only for the sheer number of public appeals, but also for the diversity of outlets to which he carried his message and the quite different tenor of the messages delivered, depending upon the outlet to whom he was communicating. In his nationally televised address to the nation, the President was, to borrow a phrase, a unifier, not a divider, offering a solemn appeal for national unity. He thus observed: “In 1965, when some argued that Medicare represented a government takeover of health care, members of Congress – Democrats and Republicans – did not back down. They jointed together so that all of us could

¹ Obama also made the first such appearance, on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, six months earlier, on March 18, 2009. In most other respects, however, these were not exceptional events. For instance, nine different presidential candidates appeared on Letterman during 2007 (Gold 2007). This, in turn, is only one of many soft news outlets – primarily daytime and late-night talk shows – to attract presidential candidates in the 2008 election cycle.
enter our golden years with some basic peace of mind…I still believe we can replace acrimony with civility.”

Obama’s email appeals took a different tack, inviting direct action from recipients – in the form of making donations, joining discussion groups, participating in rallies, watching a video clip, visiting Obama’s “Organizing for America” website, submitting homemade videos, or calling Congress -- to support the president’s healthcare reform effort. They were also far more aggressive in their appeals, delivering messages like the following: “Those who profit from the status quo – and those who put partisan advantage above all else – will fight us every inch of the way…The stakes are too high to let scare tactics cloud the debate…” (source: barackobama.com email, 9/9/09).

Finally, in his Letterman appearance, Obama lightened his tone, quipping, for instance, in response to a question about allegations that racism motivated the anti-healthcare reform movement, that “I think it is important to realize that I was actually black before the election.” While Obama offered a variety of policy-related observations, he also took time to comment on his daughters’ transition to the White House. No mention of political parties or partisanship crossed the president’s lips during the Letterman appearance, with the sole exception of a single comment aimed at dismissing partisan debate over his policies by proclaiming that “it doesn’t matter” if you are a Democrat or a Republican.

The liberal blogosphere dutifully replayed video highlights from all of Obama’s appearances, thereby magnifying his message and delivering it directly to the President’s base.

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2 Other Internet appeals are overtly partisan, such as one from January 19, 2010, supporting Martha Coakley’s failed Senate bid. The email, in part, warned that if recipients didn’t vote for Coakley, “…the Senate can get one more person already walking in lockstep with Washington Republicans.”
For instance, on September 21st, Huffingtonpost.com featured “Highlights from Obama’s Sunday Show Blitz,” inviting readers to “vote for the best clip.” The next day the site featured video clips from Obama’s Letterman appearance.

Taken together, this arguably represents an unprecedented – at least in its diversity -- presidential media blitz aimed at a single policy initiative. It begs the question of why President Obama pursued such a strategy, and why he did so in such starkly differing manners across different media outlets. The answer, I argue, is that a combination of fragmenting media and media audiences has forced President Obama to adopt a complex and multi-tiered communication strategy aimed at reaching, in the aggregate, an audience comparable in numbers and partisan diversity to those his predecessors from the 1960s through the 1980s were largely able to take for granted virtually any time they appeared on national TV (Baum and Kernell 1999). The changing media landscape means that presidents, and politicians in general, need to work much harder to communicate with the American people, and to be far more precise in tailoring their messages to particular sub-constituencies who might otherwise tune them out entirely. As Blumler and Kavanagh (1999: 221-2) argue, “[t]he presumption of mass exposure to relatively uniform political content, which has underpinned each of the three leading paradigms of political effect—agenda setting, the spiral of silence, and the cultivation hypothesis—can no longer be taken for granted.”

In this study, I argue that presidents, and political leaders in general, have two primary leadership strategy alternatives. The first, which I term “preaching to the choir” entails reaching out to one’s political base in order to excite core supporters so they will show up in large numbers on election day as well as enthusiastically support the leader on major policy issues. The second, which I term “converting the flock,” consists of reaching out beyond one’s base, in
order to recruit additional supporters and thereby expand one’s support coalition. Neither strategy is new; presidents have long pursued both, frequently varying their emphasis from issue to issue, depending on which groups supported or opposed a given policy initiative. However, the ground underneath which presidents have stood while pursuing these strategies has shifted dramatically in recent years. This in turn has altered their relative costs and benefits, as well as their efficacies.

The first decade of the 21st Century has been characterized by an arguably unique historical circumstance in which three distinct types of media -- each appealing to quite distinct audience types -- coexist, cover news and politics, and compete for the attention of the American public. These are the traditional news media, dominated by the major broadcast networks and national newspapers, the so-called “new media,” most notably cable TV news and the Internet, and the soft news media, consisting of daytime and late-night talk shows, as well as entertainment-oriented and tabloid news magazine programs.3 The audiences for these three media differ in important ways, with profound implications for their place in modern presidential communication strategies.

In the remainder of this paper I discuss each of the three medias, considering their potential role and implications for presidential efforts to preach to the choir or convert the flock. I then consider the broader implications of the changing media landscape for the future of presidential leadership. Through this analysis, I hope to shed light on several of the central

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3 One could include political talk radio in the “new media” category. While talk radio can be an important media player, because this medium is in key respects comparable to partisan political blogs, I do not focus on it in the present study. However, many of the arguments I make apply to political talk radio as well.
questions guiding this volume, including the effects of the evolving media and information environment on American political discourse, governance, and government accountability.

**Traditional News Media**

For nearly four decades, the traditional news media in general, and network television in particular, were the primary vehicle through which presidents sought to convert the flock. The decline of the traditional news media since the early 1990s is well documented and widely reported (Baum and Kernell 1999 & 2007, Hamilton 2003, Baum 2003). The combined ratings for the evening newscasts of the “big three” broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) have fallen from about 58 in 1969 to a little over 16 in 2008.\(^4\) Indeed, according to a 2008 survey (Pew Center 2008), the percent of Americans indicating that they regularly watch cable news now exceeds the percentage regularly watching network news (by 39 to 29%).

Not only has the overall audience for network news declined dramatically, but the demographics of network news viewers have also shifted starkly. Where the typical network news viewer was once comparable to the median television viewer (after all, the networks enjoyed an oligopoly for nearly four decades), by 2008 the network audience was notably older (with a median age of 61.3\(^5\)) and, according to the Pew Center (2008), composed of more Democrats than Republicans by over a 2-to-1 ratio (45 vs. 22% “regular” viewers). These figures suggest that nationally televised presidential addresses are unlikely to reach the same cross-section of Americans as they did in earlier decades.

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\(^4\) Sources: Baum and Kernell (1999); http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2009/chartland.php?id=1008&ct=line&dir=&sort=&col1_box=1&col2_box=1&col3_box=1

Of course, as the number of television networks broadcasting presidential addresses has increased (according to nielsenwire.com, 7 networks covered George W. Bush’s first State of the Union Address in 2001, compared to 11 covering Obama’s first State of the Union address in 2010), presidents presumably reach at least some members of the public that have abandoned the networks. However, according to the aforementioned Pew Center (2008) survey, cable news viewers are considerably more educated and politically knowledgeable than network news viewers, or the general public for that matter. Combined with the rise of a vast number of alternative, entertainment-oriented outlets, this makes it seem quite unlikely that cable news has entirely filled the void created by the mass exodus from the big three networks (but see Prior 2007).

Typical ratings for presidential addresses have fallen along with the network news audience. For instance, Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter each averaged audience ratings for their televised addresses and press conferences of about 48 (where each 1 point represents 1% of US households owning televisions). The corresponding averages for Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush were about 30 in each case, only slightly below the 32.5 rating for President Obama’s first national address to the nation on February 24, 2009.

Moreover, the news values of the traditional news media have made it a particularly difficult environment for presidential communications. Baum and Groeling (2008, 2009a, 2009b) document the tremendous network news bias toward negative, hostile coverage of presidents and their policies. They report that across 42 foreign policy rally events between 1979 and 2003 nearly 80% of all rhetoric from members of Congress (MC’s) appearing on the evening news within 61-day periods surrounding the events was critical of the president and his policies. The ratio was far more favorable on network Sunday morning talk shows (Baum and Groeling 2009a,
Groeling and Baum 2009), where MC’s had the opportunity to speak in their own voice in an unfiltered “open mike” format. This suggests a strong network negativity bias on the heavily-edited network news.

News coverage of the president in the traditional media has also shifted in form, with the president’s own words supplemented, and increasingly supplanted, by the interpretations of journalists. The average presidential soundbite on the evening news – that is, a president speaking in his own words -- declined from about 40 seconds in 1968 (Hallin 1994) to 7.8 seconds in 2004. This means that journalists’ relatively negative coverage of the president increasingly dominates news broadcasts.

Where network television once afforded presidents an ideal opportunity to communicate with a broad cross-section of the public, today whenever a president takes to the airwaves he must compete with myriad alternative media for the public’s attention. Indeed, broadcast networks have grown increasingly hesitant to surrender their airwaves for presidential communication. According to one report (Consoli 2009), network executives lost roughly $30 million in advertising revenue in the first half of 2009 due to preemptions for Obama news conferences. This concern, in turn, prompted one of the “big four” networks (Fox) to decline the president’s request for airtime on April 29, 2009.

Taken together, these patterns paint a picture of an increasingly inhospitable environment for presidential communication. The major networks no longer offer presidents access to a common civic space where all Americans gather on a routine basis. When presidents seek airtime for national addresses, they must first persuade skeptical network executives that their address will be newsworthy. As one network executive commented: "We will continue to make our decisions on White House requests on a case-by-case basis, but the Fox decision [to not
broadcast Obama’s 4/29/09 press conference] gives us cover to reject a request if we feel that there is no urgent breaking news that is going to be discussed" (Consoli 2009).

When presidents or their lieutenants do appear in traditional news environments, they can usually count on skeptical reporters challenging the merits of their policies, and often even the motives behind them. Consequently, in an era in which presidents arguably depend more than ever before on “going public” (Kernell 2006) as a core leadership strategy (Baum and Kernell 2007), one of their principal avenues for doing so over the past half century is becoming increasingly foreclosed. When recent presidents have attempted to speak to the entire nation, their audiences are far smaller than those enjoyed by their predecessors in earlier decades, even after accounting for viewers from cable news outlets. In fact, President Obama’s State of the Union address on January 27, 2010 earned a combined rating of only 11 across the big three broadcast networks.6 This suggests that the networks no longer afford presidents the capacity to reach out to a broad cross-section of the American people. Instead, they are able to offer a far smaller and more ideologically and generationally narrow segment of the population. For instance, according to data reported by Kernell and Rice (2010), the partisan gap in audiences for presidential television addresses has increased substantially over time. Across the 18 prime time presidential addresses they investigated between 1971 and 1995, the gap in audience between members of the president’s party and opposition partisans averaged 2.6%. Between 1996 and 2007, the average partisan gap across the 14 appearances for which data were available increased more than fourfold, to 11.8%. In short, over time the audience for presidential addresses has increasingly come to be dominated by his fellow partisans.

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This combination of audiences smaller in size and narrower in breadth, along with generally skeptical treatment by reporters of nearly any presidential statement or policy proposal, means that traditional news outlets have lost much of their utility to presidents as vehicles for converting the flock.

**New Media**

The so-called new media, by which I refer primarily to cable news channels and the Internet, differ in important ways from their traditional media cousins. Most notably, nearly all such outlets self-consciously seek to appeal to relatively narrow, and presumably more loyal niches of the public. Rather than seeking to be all things to all people – as the major networks did during their heyday – new media outlets try to provide a product that more closely fits the preferences of a particular subset of the people. In news and politics, the primary dimension upon which new media outlets have sought to differentiate themselves is ideology. Most notably, in 2010 there are prominent cable news channels aimed primarily at liberals (MSNBC), conservatives (Fox), and moderates (CNN). Similarly, on the Internet, the political blogosphere is dominated by ideologically narrow websites like Huffingtonpost.com on the left and Michellemalkin.com on the right. As the range of options available to consumers seeking political information has expanded, making available media environments that closely match their personal political preferences, audiences have increasingly availed themselves of the opportunity to self-select into ideologically friendly political news environments.

**Cable News**

Figures 1 and 2 show the trend, from 2000 to 2008 in the partisan make-up of audiences for CNN and Fox (Figure 1) and for CNN, Fox, and MSNBC (Figure 2). The first graphic is based on self-reports in surveys by the Pew Center (2009), while the second is derived from
pooled national surveys conducted by a market research firm (Scarborough), representing over 100,000 interviews for each period included in the graphic (Kernell and Rice 2010, Feltus 2009).

[Figures 1 and 2 here]

The curves in Figures 1 and 2 are derived from quite distinct data sources. Yet they paint a similar picture. In 2000, the audiences for Fox, CNN, and MSNBC consisted of similar proportions of Democrats and Republicans. In the Pew data, an identical proportion of Democrats and Republicans reported “regularly” watching Fox, which only two percentage points separated “regular” partisan viewers on CNN. In the Scarborough data, in turn, the partisan gaps for viewers of CNN, Fox, and MSNBC in 2000 were 4, 8, and 2 percentage points, respectively. By 2008, these gaps had expanded considerably, as partisans increasingly sought out ideologically friendly media environments. In the Pew Center corresponding partisan gaps in 2008 were 15 and 16 points for CNN and Fox, respectively. In the Scarborough data, the gaps in 2008-09 stood at 30, 20, and 27 points, for CNN, Fox, and MSNBC, respectively.

The partisan gaps reported by the Pew Center are even larger when we focus on a question asking respondents about their “main source” of news. In their July 2009 “News Attitudes” survey, Pew reports that among Republicans, 38% chose Fox as their main sources of news, compared to only 13% who chose CNN. Conversely, among Democrats 46% chose CNN compared to only 18% who selected Fox. Independents were nearly evenly divided, with 38% choosing Fox and 35% choosing CNN. If Independents who leaned toward one or the other party are added to the mix, the figures are even more stark: 63 to 25% in favor of Fox among Republicans, and nearly the precise opposite – 63 to 22% in favor of CNN – among Democrats.7 The figures are similar when one focuses on viewers’ preferred sources of campaign news. As

7 Source: http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1395/partisanship-fox-news-and--other-cable-news-audiences
Figure 3 indicates, in 2008 Democrats were far more likely to turn to CNN or MSNBC, and somewhat more likely to turn to network news, for information about the presidential campaign, while Republicans were far more likely to turn to Fox.

[Figure 3 here]

While it is certainly the case that some partisan overlap remains (Feltus 2009, Prior 2007, Kernell and Rice 2010) – with potentially important implications for presidential communication (see below) -- these data clearly suggest a fairly strong tendency toward partisan filtering on cable news.

Internet

If niche programming has emerged as an important competitive strategy for television news, it is arguably the most consequential such strategy on the Internet. Research (Hindman 2007) has shown that a stunningly small number of political news-oriented outlets dominate news and public affairs traffic on the web. While some of the most heavily trafficked sites – such as CNN.com, MSNBC.com, and Yahoo News -- remain predominantly audience aggregators, rather than disaggregators, the political blogosphere functions primarily as an arena for partisan and ideological self-selection.

There are a variety of well-documented digital divides online, including by age, gender, race, and socio-economic status. Some – particularly gender and race -- have receded somewhat in recent years. In each case, the net effect is that some Americans are systematically more likely than others to rely upon the Internet for political news. Most of these divides are exogenous to the preferences and policies of individual Internet outlets. However, political ideology remains a key proactive filter that political news websites in general, and blogs in particular, frequently employ in seeking to build a loyal niche audience.
Along these lines, Baum and Groeling (2008, 2009a) report that left-leaning political blogs, like DailyKos.com are disproportionately likely to cover news that favors Democrats over Republicans, while right-leaning blogs, like FreeRepublic.com are disproportionately likely to feature news favorable to Republicans over Democrats. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the ideological and partisan slant on political blogs, users of these sites are, on average, more likely than typical Americans to prefer news that reinforces their pre-existing preferences (far more so than, say, viewers of network news), more likely to discuss political news with family and friends (Baum and Groeling 2008) and, as shown in Figure 4, more ideologically extreme.8

[Figure 4 here]

Not surprisingly, the audiences for such outlets are highly skewed based on party affiliation. For instance, according to an April 2007 Nielsen report (All 2007), 77% of HuffingtonPost.com readers were registered Democrats, and only 3.8% were registered Republicans. While, as with cable news, some Internet consumers seek out news from across the ideological spectrum -- and some evidence (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010) suggests they do so to a greater extent on the Internet than on cable – the Internet is nonetheless a particularly amenable environment for ideological self-selection, and the aforementioned evidence from political blogs suggests that many politically oriented news consumers engage in such self-imposed ideological segregation.9

8 Source: Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project survey (CCAP 2008). In Figure 4, 0=moderate, 1=liberal or conservative, and 2=very liberal or very conservative (Source: CCAP 2008).

9 Along these lines, Baum and Groeling (2009) report evidence that some ideological news blogs cover the “other side” primarily to set the stage for making their own political argument, in effect using “opposition” political blogs as strawmen. It seems likely that at least some politically sophisticated
While the audience for political news on the Internet does not yet approach that for television news (Baum and Groeling 2008), it is by no means trivial. Figure 4 presents the percentage of survey respondents (Pew Center 2008) who reported getting news about the 2008 presidential campaign from the Internet. The results indicate that among respondents under age 50, the Internet was the second most important source of campaign news, trailing only television. Among respondents under age 30, nearly half reported relying on the Internet for campaign news.

[Figure 5 here]

Turning from the Internet news in general to political blogs in particular, according to comScore.com, in September 2008 the total number of unique visitors to the top 15 political blog sites was approximately 206 million. This represents about a 10% increase over the prior year. Survey data in roughly the same period (Pew Center 2008) indicates that 37% of Americans reported going online for news at least three times per week, an increase of 19% from 2006. This compares to 39% and 29% of respondents who claimed to regularly watch cable and network news, respectively.

**New Media and Leadership**

Taken together, these data suggest that the new media are becoming an increasingly central presence in the American political news landscape. They are doing so, in turn, primarily by appealing to relatively narrow segments of the overall audience who self-select into news.

Internet news consumers are similarly motivated when “crossing over” to ideologically hostile news sources.

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10 source: http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2008/10/Huffington_Post_and_Politico_Lead_Political_Blogs/(language)/eng-US
environments where they are disproportionately likely to encounter news and information that reinforces, rather than challenges, their preexisting political beliefs.

These patterns hold important implications for presidential leadership. The new media are ideal vehicles for preaching to the choir. Increasingly sophisticated communication methods – such as Obama’s targeted email campaign on health care reform described in the introduction – combined with partisan self-selection by consumers, allow political leaders an unprecedented opportunity to reach out to their core supporters. By providing so-called “red meat to the base,” presidents can rally supporters to organize in their communities to support policy proposals, as well as to turn out on election day. More effective local organizing of core supporters, in turn, can indirectly enhance presidents’ capacities to convert the flock, by transforming their core supporters into messengers charged with reaching out beyond the base. Indeed, much of the aforementioned Obama email campaign was aimed at inspiring core supporters to become active advocates of his healthcare reform policy in their communities. Also worth noting, core supporters are far more likely than typical individuals to contribute money to the president’s causes. Obama’s healthcare email campaign thus also served as a potentially potent fundraising vehicle. Similar types of appeals seem likely to be effective in the partisan blogosphere and, to some extent, on cable news channels.

All that said, it is important to also recognize that new media do offer some opportunities for presidents to directly convert the flock. While opportunities to do so may be relatively rare, they can sometimes be particularly effective. For instance, if a president is able to gain a sympathetic audience from an outlet widely perceived as ideologically hostile, consumers of that outlet are likely to view his message as considerably more credible – given the costly signal
made by the ideologically hostile outlet in airing the president’s message -- than they would in virtually any other context (Baum and Groeling 2009a).

Along these lines, Baum and Groeling (2009b) find, in an experiment, that consumers were more persuaded by criticism of President George W. Bush when it appeared to emanate from Fox news than when it appeared to have originated on CNN, while finding the precise opposite pattern for praise of President Bush. They report similar patterns in national survey data regarding the war in Iraq.

This logic may explain President Obama’s decision to submit to an interview on Fox News on November 18, 2009, soon after a verbal joust between Fox News and the White House, in which White House Communications Director Anita Dunn called Fox a “wing of the Republican Party.”11 Such a strategy holds potential twin benefits for the White House. First, to the extent they can undermine Fox’s status as a legitimate news source, they can reduce the ability of their political opponents (conservative Republicans) to use the outlet as a vehicle for converting the flock by appealing to, say, Independent viewers (either by persuading them not to watch the network, or by reducing the credibility of the information they encounter if they continue to watch). Second, it maximizes the potential credibility boost the president gains from an appearance on the network. After all, Fox’s decision to afford the president a relatively civil venue for promoting his policies may appear as a costly signal that he is to be considered seriously, if not necessarily supported. The more hostile the venue, in turn, the costlier the signal it sends.

While for many issues this is unlikely to result in significant persuasion of the opposition base, it may help the president persuade marginal viewers, such as Independents (the least hostile

portion of “the flock”). Moreover, on some issues – where policies do not fall out along clear
clear partisan lines – the president may be able to communicate effectively to the opposition, thereby,
in effect, further converting the flock. One case in point is the Obama Administration’s policy of
escalating the U.S. conflict in Afghanistan, a policy that majorities of both Republicans and
Democrats support. Obama succeeded in raising Republican support for the policy by
emphasizing traditional national security concerns rather than, or at least in addition to, the core
concerns of more liberal internationalist voters, such as human rights and democracy (Baum and
Nau 2009). Nonetheless, with the latter caveat, it seems reasonable to conclude that the new
media are better suited for preaching to the choir than for converting the flock.

**Soft News**

Millions of Americans who eschew most traditional news outlets, at least most of the
time, and who rarely if ever read political blogs or other Internet news outlets, are nonetheless
exposed to at least *some* political news via the so-called soft news media, including daytime and
late-night talk shows, as well as entertainment-oriented news outlets and tabloids. President

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12 According to Gallup, as of early December 2009, 58% of Democrats favored Obama’s Afghanistan
policy, compared to 55% of Republicans. The corresponding percentages opposing the policy were 35
and 37% (Source: http://www.gallup.com/poll/124562/obama-plan-afghanistan-finds-bipartisan-
support.aspx).

13 Zaller (2003: 129) states that, “soft news is information that is either personally useful or merely
entertaining.” Borrowing from Patterson (2000), I define “soft news” similarly, as a set of story
characteristics, including the absence of a public policy component, sensationalized presentation, human-
interest themes and emphasis on dramatic subject matter. Baum (2003), in turn, refers to those media
outlets that focus *primarily* on such material – including entertainment and tabloid news shows, network
newsmagazines, and daytime and late night talk shows -- as the soft news media.
Obama’s aforementioned September 21, 2009 appearance on the David Letterman Show was his fifth on the program. Obama was by no means alone in courting Letterman in 2008. Nine different presidential candidates appeared on the show during 2007 (Gold 2007). Letterman is only one of many soft news outlets – primarily daytime and late-night talk shows – to attract presidential candidates in the 2008 election cycle. In fact, during the 2000, 2004 and 2008 primary and general presidential election campaigns, virtually all candidates appeared on daytime and late-night, entertainment-oriented talk shows. According to a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA 2008), presidential candidates made a total of 110 appearances on late-night talk shows in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election. This represents over a fourfold increase from the corresponding total of 25 in 2004. Figure 6 tallies the appearances by those individual candidates who accounted for the bulk of these numbers.\textsuperscript{14}

\cite{figure6}

Why would any politician, let alone a sitting president, choose to add a late night comedy-oriented talk show to his already-crowded weekend media itinerary of five appearances on traditional news and political interview shows? One obvious answer concerns the magnitude of the audience. Nearly 7.2 million Americans tuned in to watch the President defend his healthcare proposals on Letterman, as well as exchange one-liners with the host and describe his daughters’ transition to life in the White House. This was the largest audience for the show in

\textsuperscript{14} The several appearances not included in Figure 6 include those by candidate family members.
four years and represents more than double the 3.1 million who tuned in to Obama’s more
traditional news interview the day before on ABC’s *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*.\(^{15}\)

A second, perhaps slightly less obvious answer concerns the *nature* of Letterman’s
audeience. Compared to the typical audience for traditional news shows such as ABC’s *This
Week*, Letterman’s audience is less politically engaged, less ideologically extreme and less
partisan (Baum 2003 and 2005, Baum and Jamison 2006). Consequently, Letterman’s viewers
are more likely to be persuaded by a presidential appeal than the relatively more partisan and
ideologically extreme audiences of typical traditional news venues (Zaller 1992, Baum 2003).
Given the relatively stronger partisan and ideological orientation of typical political Internet blog
readers, this persuasion gap is presumably even larger relative to these latter outlets.

Finally, such interviews tend to present candidates in a more favorable light than
traditional political interview shows. For example, commenting on a different 2008 presidential
candidate’s talk show appearances, Gold (2007) observes, “John and Elizabeth Edwards got
substantially gentler treatment from Leno on ‘The Tonight Show’ than they did from Katie
Couric on ’60 Minutes.” In short, appearances on daytime and late-night entertainment talk
shows, or other soft news programs, afford politicians one of their best opportunities to reach a
large group of potentially persuadable voters in a relatively sympathetic venue (Baum 2005).
This, therefore, arguably represents the one of the *last*, and perhaps the *best* opportunity for
political leaders to convert the flock.

\(^{15}\) Appearances by presidential aspirants on *daytime* talk shows have also attracted large audiences. For
instance, a decade ago, 8.7 million households watched Al Gore’s September 11, 2000 appearance on the
Oprah Winfrey Show; even more households tuned in to George W. Bush’s appearance eight days later
(Baum 2005).
The current political environment, in which the major parties compete for an ever-smaller proportion of the voting public that remains persuadable – or, stated differently, an ever-shrinking flock – inflates the political significance of soft news venues. It is thus unsurprising that both political candidates and sitting presidents court the attention of the soft news media. They do so not only by appearing on soft news-oriented interview shows, but also by emphasizing soft news themes in their rhetoric, as well as by associating themselves with personalities who appeal to entertainment-oriented media.

The 2005 State of the Union Address offers an example of the former pattern. In the run-up to the address, President Bush presented a major speech outlining an ambitious agenda for space exploration. The issue, however, failed to capture the public’s interest. In contrast, a second apparent pre-address “trial balloon” focusing on steroid abuse did capture the public’s imagination. Consequently, at the last moment, the president altered a substantial segment of his address to drop any mention of space exploration in favor of condemning steroid abuse among professional athletes.  

The president’s focus on steroid abuse – which necessitated reseating California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, an admitted steroid user, away from First Lady Laura Bush -- paid political dividends. The nation’s sports media (TV, radio, and print) covered the story extensively. Taking up the president’s call to arms, the Congress quickly arranged a series of high-profile hearings on the subject. These hearings, involving some of the nations’ most celebrated athletes, generated a feeding frenzy of media coverage. By focusing on steroids, the president reached a vast audience of sports enthusiasts who might otherwise have never heard about his State of the Union address. He also generated considerable post-address attention by

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16 I thank Sam Popkin for calling my attention to this anecdote.
continuing to promote the issue, even as his allies in Congress arranged public hearings on the subject; hearings that attracted a nationwide audience thanks to predictable media fascination with the lifestyles (and foibles) of America’s rich and famous celebrities, including star athletes. By reaching out beyond his live television audience – which consisted mostly of his core supporters (Kernell and Rice 2010) – President Bush, and later the Republican Congressional leadership, sought to use the soft news media as a means of reaching and thereby converting the flock.

In the latter case, Baum (2007) notes that when former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice traveled abroad, she often arranged airport photo opportunities with local celebrities. In Tokyo, she posed for photographs with a popular Japanese-American sumo wrestling champion; in Romania, she met with Olympic legend Nadia Comaneci. Rice intended these “photo ops” to attract the local media, so that they would pay more attention to the Secretary’s visit and, in doing so, transmit her messages to segments of the local population that might otherwise ignore her visit. One official predicted that Romanians “will go crazy” over the secretary’s meeting with Comaneci (Brinkley 2005).

In the run-up to the March 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, in turn, the Pentagon granted coveted reporting slots “embedded” within U.S. combat units to such decidedly apolitical media outlets as MTV, Rolling Stone, and People magazine. Explaining the Pentagon’s rationale for doing so, Bryan G. Whitman, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Media Operations, explained:

It is a recognition that not everyone gets their news from The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal….We consciously looked at those news organizations that have reach and impact and provided them with the greatest
possible opportunities…. Each of them [embedded reporters] reach a different audience. Our goal was to dominate the information market…(Carr 2003).

Not only did the Pentagon embed soft news reporters with U.S. troops in Iraq, but it also fed them regular doses of soft news friendly topics and themes, such as defining the U.S. conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan in stark, moralistic terms emphasizing heroes and villains. In the heroism camp are the narratives of Pat Tillman – a college football star who volunteered to forego a lucrative NFL contract in order to serve in the military following 9/11, and was later tragically killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan – as well as Jessica Lynch – a soldier captured by enemy forces in Iraq and subsequently freed in a daring military raid. In both cases, the soft news media offered saturation coverage of these classic stories of heroism, one tragic and the other more uplifting, both turning out to have played out quite differently from the original administration narrative as portrayed in the media.

In the case of villains, successive U.S. presidents have routinely cast America’s adversaries – from Saddam, to Milosevic, to Aideed -- as the embodiment of evil, frequently likening them to Adolf Hitler (Baum 2003). This transforms arcane foreign policy conflicts into dramatic soap operas, thereby appealing to soft news sensibilities. In this one respect, American adversaries share in common the fate of spoiled millionaire athletes on steroids: senior American officials have cast both as the villains in classic American morality plays.

Of course, not all soft news outlets are the same. Some, such as the Daily Show with Jon Stewart and the Colbert Report, cater to more politically sophisticated and partisan audience niches (Jamison and Baum, forthcoming). When presidential candidates or other politicians appear on these venues, they are more likely to be preaching to the choir than converting the flock. Yet, with these noteworthy exceptions, soft news outlets remain predominantly a venue for
converting the flock. It is consequently unsurprising that presidential candidates appearing on
daytime and late-night talk shows typically offer almost no mention of political parties or
partisanship (Baum 2005). Such rhetoric might offend the sensibilities of the relatively less-
partisan audiences of such venues (relative to those of other, more traditional news or new media
outlets).

Conclusion

The picture I have painted of the contemporary media landscape is in some respects
overly stark. For one thing, there is certainly overlap between the three medias, both in terms of
content and audience. Viewers of traditional news media, especially network news, are more left-
leaning than in the past, while arguably the fastest growing segment of the soft news media –
satiric political news shows like the Daily Show with Jon Stewart -- caters less to nonpartisan
viewers than to politically sophisticated ideologues. Some Democrats consume conservative
media, while some Republicans consume liberal media. All three medias, in turn, continue to
afford presidents at least some capacity to both preach to the choir and convert the flock.
Political messages frequently cross the boundaries of the three medias, as exemplified by the
Obama media blitz described at the outset of this paper. Hence, the media commons, and the
common civic space for public affairs dialogue it created, has not entirely disappeared, nor has
the capacity of presidents to use the media as a tool for building broader support constituencies
via converting the flock.

That said, current trends toward ever more consumer self-selection and increasingly
sophisticated information filtering and media targeting of consumer preferences all appear to
portend a trend toward greater audience fragmentation and hence continued shrinking of the
media commons. It seems inevitable that news providers will increasingly apply the same
filtering technologies that allow media content distributors like Netflix and iTunes to determine the types of movies or music a customer is likely to prefer, to news and public affairs content. The end result may be what Cass Sunstein (2009) terms “cyberbalkanization,” with the media commons is largely replaced by the “daily me” in which consumers encounter only the news and information they want, most of which tends to confirm rather than challenge their preexisting attitudes. Whether or not the media commons disappears entirely, there is little question that technological innovations and shifts in audience behavior are changing the organization of news consumption, with content growing increasingly personalized and subject to consumer preferences regarding what, when and where they entertain themselves or expose themselves to politically themed news.

This, in turn, represents both a challenge and an opportunity for political leaders. It is a challenge in that reaching beyond one’s base is increasingly difficult, and may perhaps become mostly limited to soft news appeals. After all, the soft news media remain arguably the best avenue for reaching relatively persuadable voters. Even there, some scholars (Parkin 2008, Xenos and Becker 2009) have speculated that as filtering technologies consumers can use to set their own daily news menus grow increasingly adept, they will pre-empt much of the incidental political learning associated with soft news consumption by relatively inattentive and apolitical citizens.

It represents an opportunity, on the other hand, as preaching to the choir is in many respects easier and more effective than ever before, as new media technologies allow leaders to first identify and then communicate more directly with their core constituents. A case in point is the Obama Administration’s frequent appeals to 13 million Americans via its email database,
through which it raised record campaign contributions in 2008 and has since regularly sought to rally the Democratic base in support of the President’s policies.

Of course, effective presidential leadership requires combining both strategies – that is, exciting the base while building coalitions -- and there is no reason to suppose that future presidents will succeed, at least over the longer term, by emphasizing one over the other. Along with, and perhaps in part because of, the three medias, politics in America are at a crossroads. Traditional communications channels are increasingly foreclosed, even as new ones emerge. Different channels, in turn, reach different audiences, and so privilege different communication strategies, different forms of leadership, and ultimately, almost certainly, different policies (Popkin 2006). Given the enormity and speed of the changes in this marketplace, and the potential consequences for democratic participation and the strategic landscape for politicians, this is a key area for future scholarly research.
References

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FIGURE 1. Trend in Partisan Preferences for CNN vs. Fox

FIGURE 2. Trend in Partisan Viewing of CNN, Fox, and MSNBC

Sources: Kernell & Rice (2010), Feltus (2009)
FIGURE 3. 2008 Partisan Profile of Regular Campaign News Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fox</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSNBC</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURE 4. Average Days in Past Week Accessed Political Blogs on Internet, as Strength of Ideology Varies
Figure 5.

Percent of Public Relying on Medium for News About Campaign 2008

Age Cohort

- 18-29
- 30-49
- 50-64
- 65+
- Total

Medium
- Television
- Internet
- Newspapers
- Radio
FIGURE 6. Number of Late-Night Talk Show Appearances by Presidential Candidates, 2004 vs. 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Edwards</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Sharpton</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard Dean</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol Moseley-Braun</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wesley Clark</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John McCain</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Huckabee</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barack Obama</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary Clinton</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Biden</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Edwards</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis Kucinich</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred Thompson</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Dodd</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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