Chapter 15

Media, Public Opinion, and Presidential Leadership

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On September 9, 2009, over 32 million Americans watched President Barack Obama deliver a prime time television address on healthcare reform to a joint session of Congress. Twelve days later, Obama appeared on the Late Show With David Letterman. For Obama, the first sitting U.S. president to appear on a late-night entertainment-oriented talk show, this was the second such appearance. It capped an intensive personal media push by the president to promote healthcare reform, including interviews on five Sunday news shows the previous day (on ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, and Univision). That same month, Obama’s Internet team sent weekly—and sometimes twice-weekly—emails on healthcare to the roughly 13 million individuals in its famed email database.

Obama’s media blitz was notable for the sheer number of public appeals, the diversity of outlets to which he carried his message, and the quite distinct tenor of the messages delivered across the differing outlets. In his nationally televised address, the president was, to paraphrase his predecessor, “a unifier, not a divider,” offering a solemn appeal for national unity:

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 enter our golden years with some basic peace of mind . . . I still believe we can replace acrimony with civility.

In contrast, Obama’s email appeals invited recipients to make donations, join discussion groups, participate in rallies, watch a video clip, visit his “Organizing for America” website, submit homemade videos, or call Congress to support the healthcare reform effort. They also issued partisan alerts, like: “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 . . . ”.

On Letterman, Obama lightened his tone, for instance quipping, in response to a question about racism in the anti-healthcare reform movement, “I think it is important to realize that I was actually black before the election.” No mention
of political parties or partisanship crossed the president’s lips, except when he asserted 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 his base. For instance, on September 21, 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 presidential media blitz aimed at a single policy initiative. It raises the question of why President Obama pursued such a strategy, and why he spoke in such starkly differing manners across different media outlets. The answer is that a combination of fragmenting media and audiences, along with journalistic norms favoring critical coverage of the president, especially during unified government, has forced Obama to adopt a multi-tiered communication strategy aimed at reaching (and persuading), in the aggregate, an audience comparable in numbers and partisan diversity to those his predecessors from the 1960s to the 1980s largely took for granted virtually any time they appeared on national TV. The changing media landscape means the president must work harder to communicate with the public, and to be far more precise in tailoring his messages to particular sub-constituencies who might otherwise dismiss his message, or tune him out entirely.

In doing so, presidents have two primary leadership strategy alternatives, which Tim Groeling and I refer to as Preaching to the Choir and Converting the Flock. The former consists of reaching out to their political base in order to excite core supporters so they will show up in large numbers on election day, as well as enthusiastically support their major policy initiatives. The latter entails reaching out beyond the base, in order to recruit additional supporters and thereby expand their support coalition. Neither strategy is new; presidents have long pursued both, varying their emphasis depending on which groups support or oppose a given policy. However, the ground underneath which presidents have stood while pursuing these strategies has shifted dramatically, thereby altering their relative costs, benefits, and efficacies.

The first decade of the twenty-first century has been characterized by an arguably unique historical circumstance in which three distinct types of media—each appealing to quite different 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 “new media,” most notably cable TV news and the Internet—ranging from blogs to social media to online versions of traditional news outlets—and the soft news media, consisting of daytime and late-night talk shows, as well as entertainment-oriented and tabloid news magazine outlets. The audiences for these three media differ in important ways, with profound implications for their place in modern presidential communication strategies. I discuss each in turn, including their effects on public opinion.
Traditional News Media

For nearly four decades, the traditional news media—particularly network television—were the primary vehicle through which presidents communicated with the American people, and in so doing sought primarily to convert the flock. Network television was the informational commons, where a broad cross-section of Americans gathered to learn about the events of the day. When the president appeared on television, 50–60 million households routinely tuned in to hear what he had to say. No longer. Today, barely more than half as many Americans typically watch prime time presidential television appearances. The combined ratings for the evening newscasts of the “big three” broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) have fallen from about 58 million in 1969 to 15.6 in 2013. According to a 2012 survey, the percentage of Americans indicating that they regularly watch cable news now exceeds the percentage regularly watching network news (by 34 to 27 percent).

What little remains of the informational commons has itself become contested partisan territory, as the president’s supporters are more and his opponents less likely to stay tuned when the president appears on TV. Figure 15.1 presents the trend, from 2002 to 2012, in partisan viewing of network news, based on self-reports in Pew Center surveys. According to these data, as recently as 2002, Republicans were 7 percentage points more likely than Democrats to describe themselves as regular viewers of network news (35 vs. 28 percent). By 2012 the self-described network audience was composed of over 50 percent more Democrats than Republicans (36 vs. 23 percent “regular” viewers). Interestingly, among Democrats this represents somewhat of a decline from 2008.

![Figure 15.1 Partisan Trend in “Regular” Viewing of Network TV News.](image-url)
mostly due to migration away from broadcast television and toward cable news (primarily MSNBC) and the Internet. These figures suggest that nationally televised presidential addresses are increasingly unlikely to reach the same cross-section of Americans as they did in earlier decades.

According to data reported by Kernell and Rice, the partisan skew in audiences for presidential television addresses has also 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 percent. Between 1996 and 2007, the average partisan gap across the 14 appearances for which data were available increased more than fourfold, to 11.8 percent. In short, over time the audience for presidential addresses has increasingly come to be dominated by his fellow partisans.

Moreover, the news values of the traditional news media have made it a particularly difficult environment for presidential communications, particularly during the Bush II and Obama presidencies, the bulk of which took place during unified government. Elsewhere, Tim Groeling and I document the tremendous network news bias toward negative, hostile coverage of presidents and their policies. We focused on a particularly hard case for locating such a pattern: foreign policy. To the extent politics do "stop at the water’s edge," then we should have been least likely to find a predominance of partisan attacks on the president in foreign policy. We examined news coverage of 42 U.S. foreign policy crises between 1979 and 2003 and found that nearly 80 percent of all rhetoric from members of Congress (MCs) appearing on network evening newscasts within 61-day periods surrounding the events was critical of the president and his policies. While this skew was somewhat larger for domestic than foreign policy, it clearly emerged for both domestic and foreign policy issues. It was particularly severe during unified government, when criticism of the president by his fellow partisan MCs was both novel—since the members of the president’s party usually support him—and authoritative—given the party’s leadership role in Congress. The ratio was far more favorable to the president on network Sunday morning talk shows, where MCs could speak in a largely unfiltered format. This suggests a strong network negativity bias on the heavily edited network news.

The predominant style of news coverage of the president has also shifted, with the president’s own words 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 to 7.8 seconds in 2004. This means that journalists’ relatively negative coverage of the president increasingly dominates news broadcasts.

Whereas 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, 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. Fox’s decision prompted one network executive to comment:

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.

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. For instance, on cable television and in the Internet blogosphere, nearly all such outlets self-consciously seek to appeal to relatively narrow niches of the public. Rather than seeking to be all things to all people—as the major networks did during their heyday—cable news outlets and political blogs try to provide content that more closely fits the preferences of particular subgroups of the public. In news and politics, the primary dimension upon which they have differentiated themselves is ideology. For instance, in 2014 there are prominent cable news channels aimed primarily at liberals (MSNBC), conservatives (Fox), and moderates (CNN). On the Internet, the political blogosphere is dominated by ideologically narrow websites like Huffingtonpost.com on the left and Michellemalkin.com on the right.

Indeed, in news content analysis, Tim Groeling and I found substantial, and sometimes dramatic, differences in the ideological skew of news from left- and right-leaning Internet blogs, as well as on cable news outlets. For instance, our data indicate that between 2004 and 2007 Fox News did in fact offer substantially less critical coverage of Iraq than CNN or the broadcast networks.

Consumers, in turn, are not passive recipients of whatever messages a given media outlet presents. Rather, they evaluate the credibility, and hence persuasiveness, of media messages in part by assessing the credibility of the messenger (the speaker) and the media outlet, as well as the costliness of the message. In a series of experiments, Groeling and I found that typical individuals exposed to the identical praise or criticism of the president’s handling of national security issues by MCs differed systematically in their
assessments of the information’s reliability, depending on the party of the speaker, the speaker’s perceived incentives vis-à-vis the message (that is, whether praise or criticism of the president was, for that messenger, self-serving or costly), and the perceived ideological orientation of the media outlet. While media outlet reputations are perhaps most stark in the new media, increasing numbers of consumers—primarily, albeit not exclusively, Republicans and Independents—also view the traditional news media as ideologically biased (in a liberal direction), thereby allowing them to more easily discount information inconsistent with their prior beliefs.

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 self-selected into ideologically friendly political news environments. For instance according to data from Scarborough research, graphically illustrated in Figure 15.2, in 2000 the differentials between Republican and Democratic viewers of CNN, Fox, and MSNBC were 4, 8, and 2 percentage points, respectively. By 2009, these gaps had expanded to 30, 20, and 27 points, respectively, with Democrats all but abandoning Fox in favor of CNN and MSNBC and Republicans moving in the opposite direction.

As with cable news, some Internet consumers seek out news from across the ideological spectrum. Indeed, some evidence suggests they do so to a greater extent on the Internet than on cable. While some additional research suggests that broad news gathering strategies are primarily limited to political
sophisticates, the Internet is nonetheless a particularly amenable environment for ideological self-selection. For instance, according to an April 2007 Nielsen report, 77 percent of readers of the left-leaning HuffingtonPost.com blogsite were registered Democrats, compared to only 3.8 percent registered Republicans. Even to the extent that individuals expose themselves to news from multiple perspectives, they are still able to discount any information that challenges their preexisting beliefs if they view either the message or messenger as lacking credibility.

At first glance, the rise of social media might seem likely to upend this pattern, to at least some degree. After all, typical social networks on the most popular social media sites, like Twitter and Facebook, are not organized around political partisanship or ideology. In theory, Facebook might expose a typical user to a diverse range of political views, depending on the interests of members of their social network. To the extent a Facebook user chooses his or her “friends” significantly based upon non-political considerations, the resulting network ought to include at least some ideological diversity. In fact, survey data appear to support this conjecture. In a 2012 Pew Center survey, 73 percent of social network site (SNS) users whose friends post political content indicated that they “only sometimes” or “never” agree with their friends’ political postings, combined with only 25 percent who “always” or “mostly” agree with their friends’ political postings.

However, upon closer scrutiny, it is unclear whether or to what extent social media do actually change the dynamics of self-selection in the fragmented media marketplace. For instance, in the same survey, fully two-thirds of the aforementioned SNS users indicated that when they disagree with others’ political posts, they ignore them. Moreover, on Twitter, political discourse appears to be disproportionately shaped by ideological extremes. For instance, one study found that members of Congress were more likely to adopt Twitter as they became increasingly ideologically extreme (to the left or right). Hong also found that ideological extremists had more Twitter followers than their less-extreme counterparts. Hong’s findings suggest that social media are subject to the same sorts of niche appeals as other media, while the Pew survey results suggest that typical SNS users do not check their capacity to discount what they perceive as non-credible information at the social network site door. Rather, they appear to be employing the same credibility assessment strategies within social network sites as they do in the traditional news media.

The capacity of individuals to discriminate between credible and non-credible information, based on perceptions of shared political interests, makes the new media particularly ill-suited for converting the flock, yet ideally suited for preaching to the choir. By providing “red meat to the base,” presidents can rally supporters to organize in their communities to support policy proposals, as well as to turn out at elections. More effective local organizing of core supporters 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.

**Soft News Media**

Regular consumers of political blogs and cable news outlets continue to constitute a fairly small minority of the American public. Many millions of other Americans who eschew most traditional news outlets, at least most of the time, and who rarely if ever read political blogs or watch cable news channels, 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.

Sam Popkin describes politicians as "crowd-seeking missiles." It is thus unsurprising that they seek to exploit the opportunity afforded them by the soft news media to reach out beyond their bases. They do so with good reason. Soft news outlets attract large crowds; nearly 7.2 million Americans watched the president exchange one-liners with Letterman. This represents more than double the 3.1 million who tuned in to Obama's interview the day before on ABC's *This Week with George Stephanopoulos.*

Letterman's audience also differs substantially from those of most traditional news outlets. For instance, compared to the typical audience for traditional news shows such as *This Week,* Letterman's audience is less politically engaged, less ideologically extreme and less partisan. Consequently, a presidential appeal is more likely to persuade Letterman's viewers than the relatively more partisan and ideologically extreme audiences of typical traditional news venues. This persuasion gap is even larger for (mostly partisan) political Internet blog readers relative to traditional news venues.

Soft news interviews tend to present candidates in a more favorable light than traditional political interview shows. For example, commenting on 2008 Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards' appearances on Leno, one reporter observed, "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. A mounting body of research, in turn, indicates that exposure to soft news influences voter's political attentiveness, knowledge and attitudes, and even their voting behavior. In reviewing the literature on soft news, Baum and Jamison refer to these as the four Oprah Effects. The soft news media thus arguably represent one of the last, and perhaps the best, opportunities for political leaders to convert the flock. Recognizing this, it is perhaps unsurprising to find more and more political candidates and elected officials reaching out to soft news venues.
That said, not all soft news is alike. Existing alongside the lighter fare offered by Letterman, Leno, Regis, and The View, among other daytime and late-night talk shows, is a parallel niche of political satire-oriented talk shows, like The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and the Colbert Report, which cater to more politically sophisticated and ideological viewers, and whose audiences tripled from 2001–2005. These shows assume a substantial amount of political knowledge on the part of audience members in order to “get the joke.” Consequently, they are far more amenable to preaching to the choir than converting the flock.

**Back to the Future?**

Though in some ways unique, the current period is by no means the first time in American politics that partisan media have strongly influenced public debate. Rather, viewed in a broader context, overwhelmingly nonpartisan journalism, as we saw in roughly the first four decades following the Second World War, appears to have been an historical anomaly.

To better understand the implications of our increasingly polarized information environment, it is helpful to consider the partisan press of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In that era, citizens who wanted an accurate picture of the political landscape could read multiple newspapers with differing partisan loyalties in order to triangulate on the “truth.” Such a strategy could offset to some extent the potentially harmful effects of partisan-oriented media. Yet the question remains as to whether typical citizens in the contemporary period, faced with far more varied alternatives, are likely to embrace a triangulation approach to news consumption. The present differs from the past in numerous important respects, not least of which is the explosion in the twenty-first century of entertainment mass media and other competitors for scarce public attention.

While it may be the case that politically attentive Americans in the twenty-first century are proportionately similar in number to their counterparts in prior news eras, a far larger portion of the contemporary population enjoys and exercises the franchise than was the case in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the ability of party organizations to reliably direct the voting of their members has declined with the death of party machines and the waning influence of state party bosses. Consequently, the breadth of consensus necessary to forge a bipartisan accord is far greater in the twenty-first century, and modern communication and polling technology allows nervous politicians to sense precisely when that consensus is eroding. Of course, gaining consent first requires capturing public attention, and even politically attentive citizens are unlikely to be able to attend to all of the competing messages in the modern media environment.

Not only is it possible to consume nearly limitless political news from virtually any ideological perspective, it is also possible to consume equally
limitless soft news, or pure entertainment, while rarely if ever encountering politics. This raises the opportunity costs for typical consumers of seeking out alternative political perspectives. Survey evidence suggests that substantial portions of the public also appear to lack the motive to do so. Not surprisingly, these same data indicate that as the strength of an individual’s political ideology increases, so too does that individual’s preference for news that reinforces her preexisting beliefs.

If the era of three medias, and particularly its more polarizing elements, is characterized more by reinforcement seeking than by triangulation, forging and sustaining bipartisan consensus will likely prove a daunting and perhaps all but insurmountable task for future leaders. Evidence of this dilemma is abundant in public reactions to the 2003 U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, a conflict that produced the greatest partisan divide ever recorded in scientific polling, both in terms of support for a U.S. military conflict and in terms of overall presidential approval. Scholars continue to debate the media’s role in sharpening, if not altogether producing, the partisan gulf in evaluations of the president and the Iraq War. Jacobson, for instance, speculates that a combination of differences in content and partisan self-selection into friendly news environments—such as Fox for Republicans and conservatives, PBS, MSNBC, and CNN for Democrats and liberals, and network news for independents and moderates—may have contributed to partisan differences in perceptions of the war and the president leading it.

As the prior discussion attests, self-selection, a concept dating back to Campbell and colleagues’ theory of minimalism, may well be sharpening partisan polarization, and this phenomenon seems likely to expand in the future. However, there exists a second, perhaps complementary, culprit: ideologically driven credibility assessments. In other words, contemporary citizens possess, arguably to a greater extent than their predecessors, the means to engage in a multipronged dissonance-avoidance strategy. Selective exposure, or avoiding dissonant information altogether, presumably represents the first such prong. However, even when this first defense mechanism fails and individuals are exposed to ideologically hostile news, they increasingly possess the means—by assigning ideological reputations to individual sources and media outlets—to systematically discount it. In other words, consumers appear also to selectively accept or reject information to which they are exposed based on its perceived credibility. Credibility assessments in turn depend on the perceived ideological leaning of the outlet presenting the information, as well as on the content of the information itself (e.g., its perceived costliness). The combined influence of selective exposure and acceptance appears, at least in the cases of Iraq and overall assessments of President Bush’s job performance, to have contributed substantially to the historically unprecedented levels of partisan polarization in America during President Bush’s second term.
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 as noted, the fastest growing segment of the soft news media—satiric political news shows like *the Daily Show*—caters primarily to politically sophisticated ideologues. Some Democrats consume conservative media, while some Republicans consume liberal media. Though not primarily politically oriented, social network sites nonetheless do appear to expose users to varying degrees of ideologically diverse political information. 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, and suggest to them precisely that, to news and public affairs content. The end result may be what Cass Sunstein terms “cyberbalkanization,” where the media commons is largely supplanted by a “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 way citizens consume news, with content growing increasingly personalized and subject to individual preferences regarding what, when and where they entertain themselves or expose themselves to politically themed information.

Of course, effective presidential leadership requires both exciting the base and 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 different policies. Given the enormity and speed of the changes in this marketplace, the potential consequences for democratic
participation and the strategic landscape for politicians, the evolution of the communication environment within which our politics are contested seems likely to play a central role in shaping the future course of American democracy.

Notes
1. Audience size estimated by nielsenwire.com
2. Barack Obama, e-mail to supporters, September 9, 2009.
4. Though I do not focus on it here, most of the arguments I make concerning partisan political blogs apply to political talk radio as well.
7. Samuel Kernell and Laurie L. Rice, Cable and Partisan Polarization of the President’s Audience (Unpublished Manuscript, University of California, San Diego, 2010).
19. Appearances by presidential aspirants on daytime talk shows also attract large audiences. For instance, 8.7 million households watched presidential candidate Al Gore’s September 11, 2000 appearance on The Oprah Winfrey Show.


22. Baum and Groeling, War Stories.


30. For example, in their famous "Middletown" study of what they regarded as a typical American city in the 1920s, Robert and Helen Lynd found that "The local morning paper distributes 8,851 copies to the 9,200 homes of the city, and the afternoon paper 6,715, plus at least half of an additional 785 sold on the street and news-stand. In addition, the circulation of out-of-town-papers[ ... ] now totals 1200 to 1500 a day." See Robert Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1929).


32. Baum and Groeling, *War Stories*.


35. Jacobson, "The War, the President."


37. Baum and Groeling, *War Stories*. 