The new media meets the new president

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Paper presented at the
Rhetoric, Politics, and the Obama Phenomenon:
A conference hosted by Texas A&M University, March 4-7, 2010

Prologue: 2008

It was early in the presidential cycle for a political rally, the first week of February 2007, a full 20 months before Election Day, and the guest of honor wasn't even an announced candidate. But at the Johnson Center on the Fairfax, Va. campus of George Mason University an electric charge was in the air.

The event was an advanceman's dream. Many in the youthful crowd carried professional-looking signs reading "Students for Barack Obama," while others—these were college kids, after all—sported handmade signs with hip slogans: "Barack the Vote" and "Barack and Roll." The warm-up speakers were all students, and as Obama took the stage, shrieks of "I love you!" rang through the night as the crowd swayed to John Mayer's haunting tune "Waiting on the World to Change." The entire event was put together by youthful volunteers who had galvanized around the charismatic freshman Senator as if by magic.

Sorcery played no part in what was happening, however. The alchemy of a spontaneous political movement was made possible by Facebook, the social networking

site that was then only three years old, and by another recent phenomenon even more powerful: namely, the ambitious aspirations of a large, restless, and highly engaged generation of young Americans who had grown up with instant communication and technology and who seamlessly incorporated it into their politics the way they did with every other aspect of their lives. "There is something happening out there, and it's big," observed Stanford political scientist Morris Fiorina. "I've been saying that 2008 is the last election of the 'old order.' But maybe we've already had that election—and this is first year of the *new* order."[1]

The 2008 presidential contenders realized something profound was taking place. John McCain's campaign set up a MySpace page and challenged college students to better his NCAA "March Madness" picks. Hillary Clinton actually announced her candidacy virtually—in a video carried on her website. But the candidate who truly understood the generational shift – and the technology that went with it – was Barack Obama because his campaign understood a basic truth of the new order: The tides of the new modes of communication could be harnessed, but they could not be controlled. Team Obama decided the best course was to ride the wave, not channel it, and the Obama campaign essentially turned its website into an interactive portal in which supporters could communicate with each other without being filtered by the campaign. In so doing, the Obama brain trust let not a thousand flowers bloom – but a number exponentially more than that. In January 2007, for example, a Nigerian-born immigrant Farouk Olu Aregbe, a grad student at the University of Missouri, launched a Facebook site called "One Million Strong for Barack." It grew immediately, and exponentially, and passed the half-million point by mid-March 2008. The Obama phenomena at times became a kind of cloud campaign that exists everywhere and nowhere, and sometimes developed almost independently of the candidate.

And in this way, Senator Obama demonstrated that he understood the tectonic shifts taking place, while foreshadowing the difficulty he would have in the White House in doing what all presidents hope for, which is controlling their own message.

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[1] Interview with Carl M. Cannon: March 14, 2008.

Introduction

Mastering texting, social networking, and other new forms of communication during a campaign are one thing. But Obama's White House has not been able to tame the forces of the new media that are defining the Obama presidency. The paper, incorporating the traditional tools and theories of a political scientist and the insights of a journalist who has worked in both traditional and new media outlets, will explore the relationship between President Obama and blogs and other forms of online media. We argue that the changes seen today are part of a long-term transition and that the new millennium may leave the president in a position of limited influence similar to that of lesser-known presidents before the rise of radio and television.

In particular, we are interested in how the cacophony of new voices has made it hard for a president – or any single political figure -- to dominate the nation's political discourse. We also will also look at how new media has allowed a resurgence of incivility in American politics and made the spread of attacks much more efficient and disruptive. In addition, our paper will also include the expansion of new information sources like FactCheck .org and Politifact.org and how these sources of instant analysis serve to diminish the impact of presidential rhetoric.

The new media meets the new president

The revival of the bully pulpit longed for by many scholars and political practitioners has been delayed – or forever muted. Many of Barack Obama's backers hoped and believed that his presence in the Oval Office would awaken the rhetorical presidency and restore the White House to the glory of Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, or Ronald Reagan. Actually, the very technology that helped the Obama phenomena carry Obama into office has made such a development difficult, if not impossible. Regardless of who occupies the office, it is increasingly evident that presidents must learn to function in a new media environment and that the chief executive's message now risks getting lost in the cacophony of messages bombarding citizens.

Two brief case studies that illustrate the dilemma of modern political communication:

McGee Moment

On February 27, 1968, famed CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite concluded an in-depth report on the progress of the Vietnam War with his carefully worded, if ominous, analysis that the United States was "mired in stalemate" in Southeast Asia—and could not win a purely military victory. Two weeks later, NBC anchorman Frank McGee was even more blunt, flatly stating during his broadcast: "The war is being lost by the administration's definition."

In the ensuing years, a legend has developed of the supposed "Cronkite moment" in which a rueful Johnson realizes he's lost public opinion: That legend was nurtured by

Johnson's White House press secretary, Bill Moyers, who later claimed that the president clicked off the television set said, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost the country." [2]

There are a couple of things wrong with this version: First of all, Moyers left the White House in 1967. Second, LBJ did not see the broadcast: the president was at a birthday party that night for John Connally in Austin. At the LBJ Library, the quote is attributed to George Christian, (although Christian did not mention it in his own 1970 book, *The President Steps Down*.) So perhaps the quote is apocryphal. Or maybe, as suggested drolly by American University history professor W. Joseph Campbell, it should be recalled as the "McGee Moment."

For our purposes, the point is that Walter Cronkite truly was the "most trusted man in America," as a poll once discovered, and the idea that losing Cronkite meant losing the war was credible. And CBS and NBC were two of only three networks in the nation at a time when an audience's working model was this: "You know something we don't know, give it to us." That was the reigning ethos long after it was healthy; i.e., after many large American cities were served by a single newspaper, and it led to pent-up resentment that exploded with the end of the Fairness Doctrine, the rebirth of talk radio, the advent of cable news and the arrival of new technologies that made every American his or her own potential pundit.

This new ethos, evident today in everything from Glen Beck's ratings surge to virtual community of the Daily Kos is, almost by definition, more egalitarian. It is also decidedly more unruly. The audience's new paradigm goes something like this: "You might know

[2] Douglast Martin, "Walter Cronkite, 92, Dies; Trusted Voice of TV News," July 17, 2009, *The New York Times*.

something we haven't heard yet, but we'll let you know how we like it." This construct enables the hundreds of thousands of profane, partisan, ill-informed, and ad-hominem comments that attach themselves like barnacles to websites ranging from Time magazine and the Christian Science Monitor to Huffington Post and Little Green Footballs. For those living in the past –be they presidents or anchormen—the price of not comprehending the audience's new attitude can be steep indeed. It cost Walter Cronkite's successor his job:

Dan Rather

In 2004, Dan Rather, relying on sketchy and partisan sources, offered the purported truth that George W. Bush had skipped out on his military commitment. Conservative citizen-journalists, spotting discrepancies in CBS's proffered evidence, fired back with debunking information of their own. A dismissive response by a former CBS executive nicely captured the clash of cultures taking place: "You couldn't have a starker contrast between the multiple layers of checks and balances at 60 Minutes and a guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas." But this wasn't some guy with his home computer—it only seemed like that to the dwindling denizens of the mainstream media. Actually what had taken place was a kind of social science experiment testing the validity of "Moore's Law."

In 1965, Gordon E. Moore, the director of R&D at Fairchild Semiconductor, contemplated the infinite-seeming possibilities of the newly invented integrated circuit—microchips—in an article for *Electronics* magazine. Six years after the invention of the microchip, Moore observed, the capacity of the computer chips had been doubling every year, a trend he predicted would continue for 10 years. (Ten years later, Moore revised his prediction to a doubling every two years. If you average his two predictions, you have the

correct answer. The amount of information a computer chip can hold doubles about every 18 months.) It was Carver Mead, a professor at the California Institute of Technology who dubbed this 18-month doubling cycle "Moore's Law." Strictly speaking, it's not a law of science at all but its application may be even broader: Moore originally offered his "law" as kind of as a rule of thumb to help microchip manufacturers predict their future market. But the "networks" anticipated by the computer chip—the human networks represented by Facebook and the blogosphere itself—suggest an even more profound application of Moore's Law: namely that information itself—the sum total of human knowledge—doubles every year and a half. Thus the little investigative team at CBS looking into George W. Bush's service in the National Guard (or lack thereof) were not up against some "guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas," they were up against a million such guys –and gals—and all their accumulated wisdom. The true power of computers had revealed themselves, and it was the power of human networking. Dan Rather was forced out, and a confederation of bloggers and journos were formed in defiance of the old order. Its name is Pajamas Media.

January, 2009

That is the environment that Barack Obama faced on January 20, 2009. He and his advisers initially had no quarrel with it; after all, it was this environment that helped him get elected the 44th president of the United States. But even in the midst of the Facebook Campaign, the seeds were planted that would imply trouble down the road. Amidst repeated mistakes by other major candidates, along with mainstream news media coverage of Obama that often seemed to his rivals to ranged from respectful to fawning, there was one moment that explicitly foreshadowed some of the trouble he would have in the White House.

Obama's first warning came on April 6, 2008 at a fundraiser in San Francisco when Senator Obama explained away his trouble gaining traction in Pennsylvania with a memorable gaffe: Offering his unvarnished view of Americans in small towns that have lost old-economy jobs, he said: "They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations."

The following day a piece ran in the Huffington Post under the byline of a citizen-journalist—and unabashed Obama fan--named Mayhill Fowler. Although that article didn't deal with the "bitter" comments, it did deal instead with another remark revealing the freshman senator's hubris: Obama asserted that he didn't necessarily need a running mate with foreign policy expertise because he already knew a lot about international affairs. According to a subsequent piece in—yes, you guessed it—Pajamas Media, HuffPost founder and editor-in-chief Arianna Huffington was none-too-pleased by the item. Huffington herself was outspoken in her support of Obama, as was most of the coverage on the popular Website. [3] To rival camps, including Hillary Rodham Clinton's, the Huffington Post seemed to be an adjunct of the Obama campaign. Nonetheless, Mayhill Fowler's item was approved for publication.

The Obama campaign was not happy with this turn of events, either. The session at which Obama made his remarks was off-the-record to journalists. Fowler, a 61-year-old graduate of Vassar and the University of California was a "citizen journalist" (a fancy way of saying she was unpaid) who was present at the fundraiser in her capacity as a Democratic

[3] Bill Bradley, "Deep Inside 'Bittergate,'" Pajamas Media, April 15, 2008.

activist and friendly blogger—and Obama campaign donor. The wife of a successful Bay Area lawyer, Fowler, a self-described "failed writer," contributed the $2,300 maximum allowed under federal law to the Obama campaign. She had a tendency to lecture the campaign a bit in her posts, but she was viewed by campaign staffers as an Obama supporter, not a journalist. But things were about to get worse. Fowler flew to New York with her tape of the Obama remarks. Working closely with top Huffington Post editors, Fowler's subsequent piece, which ran April 11, 2008, presented Obama's "bitter" remarks in about as sympathetic a context as possible. Still, the Huffington Post's editors—including Arianna Huffington herself, who monitored the situation from David Geffen's massive yacht in the South Pacific—must have known that once they ran this story they couldn't control how it was used, or in what context. Still, to their credit, they published it. And neither journalism, nor political news coverage would ever be quite the same.

Presidency scholars, contemplating a charismatic communicator like Barack Obama, "cling" to something else entirely. We tend to hold to a model of a previous age as well: A rhetorical president towering over the political landscape. Unfortunately, expectations of today's presidency may be rooted in a past. Most of us formed our impression of politics in a world in which a president could hold center stage and shape a message by successfully cultivating coverage on the major networks To many, Franklin Roosevelt defined the modern presidency because his fireside chats brilliantly matched the yearnings of Americans with the relatively new technology of radio. Later, Ronald Reagan appeared to dominate American politics because he was able to appear on most of America's television screens because viewers had few other choices. And, while commentators could certainly reflect on what Reagan had just said, their time was limited

and they were constrained by the expectations of neutrality that came with professional journalism.

In addition, the expectation of professional journalism may have (at least temporarily) promoted abnormally civil campaigns. While nasty campaigning persisted, professional journalists provided a relatively mild mannered account of the candidates and generally avoided repeating the most unpleasant aspects of campaigns that did emerge. Harsh or nasty campaign attacks were treated as abnormalities to be refuted or ignored. In 1964 Johnson's "Daisy Girl" was hounded into an early retirement. Hints of racism in pro-Bush ads in 1988 were uncovered and attacked. The mass audiences created by broadcast radio and television networks meant that advertising that was harsh would reach ears that were often unsympathetic and likely to recoil from harsh attacks.

Finally, World War II and the subsequent Cold War may have spawned what may prove to be an abnormally high level of bipartisanship in Washington, DC. Republicans and Democrats had shared trenches in the mission of saving democracy during World War II and carried some of the consensus into exercising democracy after the war. Some of this alliance carried into the Cold War and Democrats and Republicans agreed on fighting communism and squabbled only on who hated communism more. At the same time, southern conservatives driven into the arms of the Democratic party by the lingering animosities of Reconstruction muffled, or at least confused, partisanship as conservatives found themselves on both sides of the aisle.

Thus, in the days in which many Americans formed our expectation of presidential leadership, we did so while watching presidents who could monopolize a national audience in a climate where consensus and cooperation was more natural.

Today, Americans may be returning to the natural state for democratic politics. For much of our history, political communication had been the noisy chatter of hundreds of local voices. Local and state leaders reached their audiences and conducted their campaigns on a local level. In this setting, presidents had little hope of enjoying a prominent place in the political dialog. National candidates and presidents could do little to control debates until transcontinental cables tied our coast together. With the arrival of radio and television networks, and their eventual domination of American media, presidents found themselves able to reach a mass audience with little distraction. However, this advantage proved to be fleeting.

Teddy Roosevelt described the potential for presidential leadership as the "bully pulpit" in a time when the reach of the president's voice was expanding. Changes in media would allow presidents to exceed the expectations of previous generations whose experience with the modest presidency of the Nineteenth century looking very different than what was to come. Sitting at a microphone, Franklin Roosevelt was able to talk to as many Americans in one evening as Teddy Roosevelt was able to in weeks of travel in one of his "western swings." Reagan was able to bring his smile and his voice into the living rooms of Americans where only Roosevelt's words had carried. While not every president made the most of the opportunity, they saw the possibilities of presidential communication grow.

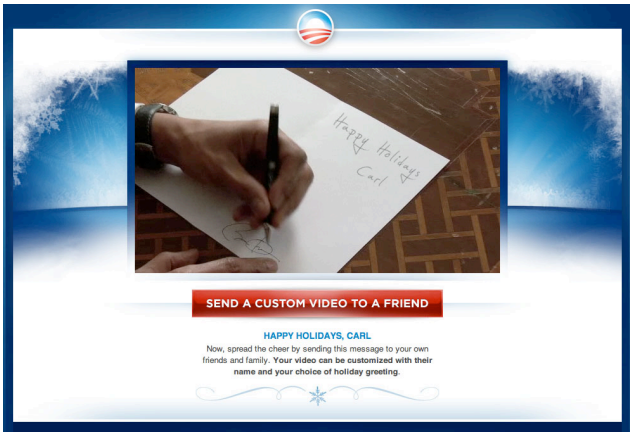
Today, the dynamic is reversed and the pulpit of the American presidency is in a different state. While some critics try to ascribe the limitations to the decline in presidential rhetoric, the change has much deeper causes that can not simply be overcome with a gifted speaker or a great text. More recent changes in the nature of political communication have allowed the forces of checks and balances to push the presidency back to a more modest position in the political system. The proliferation of political coverage, the return of a partisan press, and the new economics of dissipated media have aligned themselves to bring the bully pulpit to a more modest position.

The new president's problems with new media certainly did not result from a lack of effort. In the first year of the Obama presidency, the president's team has sent out 112 messages. The Obama White House has sent 21 of these messages out on White House digital letterhead from the WhiteHouse.gov domain. Another 91 came from Organizing for America with the Obama.com domain. Some (24) of the messages are from the President himself. Supporters were more likely to hear from Mitch Steward, Director of Organize for America (48 messages), although supporters also heard occasionally from political strategists David Plouffe (11 messages) and David Alexrod (7). Supporters were occasionally treated to messages from Michelle Obama and Joe Biden, with four and three messages respectively.

President Obama remains active on Facebook. The President's 7.5 million friends received updates daily with links to urging everything from having a happy holiday to

calling voters in Massachusetts. My.BarackObama.com remains active, but supporters can also connect using mySpace, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, Digg, LinkedIn, and a host of other services available under the "Obama Everywhere" header.

The message shared by Organize for America was sophisticated. Supporters were directed to well-produced videos or carefully constructed talking points, including high quality graphs. Even the holiday greetings were carefully personalized with users' names embedded in everything from signs on planes to a card being signed by the President himself.



The messages from the campaign blended inspiration and information. The Obama team worked hard to get their statistics and their spin to citizens and encouraged them to pass them along to friends and family.

The return of the partisan press

As journalism began to flourish in America, it did so in a phase often described as the "partisan press." In this phase many journalists found their sponsorship in the political

parties and became semi-official mouthpieces of parties and presidents.[4] The partisan press generated political debate that was often heated and nasty, although the sound of any one voice seldom carried beyond the boundaries of a paper's home town. The nasty campaign rhetoric like description of Thomas Jefferson as the "anti-Christ" were produced by partisan papers and often read locally. Partisan newspapers could feel comfortable taking their views to an extreme because they need only please a narrow, localized readership. They were familiar with their audience and their audience was largely reliant on them. Who was there to contradict a local Republican paper that accused Adams of having Charles Pickney acquire four mistresses from England for him? The technology of the time meant that most audiences were captives of geography and most readers would seldom get a second opinion.

Ultimately, changes in technology made mass distribution of newspapers more profitable and newspapers began to put aside the money they could make from their partisan sponsors and turned to advertising dollars. With the financial incentive to reach as large an audience as possible, journalists became reluctant to alienate any portion of the population with harsh partisan attacks and instead began to adapt the more neutral tone designed to win and hold a wide audience.

Fox News and MSNBC have demonstrated that ideology is once again a good foundation for establishing an audience. While critics may argue that Rupert Murdock is fond of conservative causes, there's no doubt that his companies remain committed to making money. The attempt to promote itself as a right-leaning alternative to CNN has

[4] Mel Laracey, Presidents and the People: The Partisan Story of Going Public, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002

served Fox News' marketing needs as effectively as any of the political motivations found in the building. Fox's entertainment programming has demonstrated that Murdock does not let conservatism or family values get in the way of making money.

Thus, Fox and MSBNC reflect a new phase of "opinion press" in which the tone of the partisan press has been made profitable again by the technology of cable television and the Internet. The mass publication magazines and network television find themselves trying to compete for a large audience in a setting in which dominating the market is increasingly difficult. Since no one media outlet will dominate, segmenting the audience ideologically is a viable strategy.

The opinion journalism and harshness found in media today is not a new occurrence. Marcus Daniel argues that "scandal and incivility have always been a part of American politics and at no time was this more true than the founding period."[5] In fact, the current state of media coverage has much in common with early American press. Today's opinion press does share the spirit of the old partisan press but with some key differences. As the table below reflects, while the new opinion press shares the kind of narrow ideological audience found in the old partisan press, it is much more effective at reaching a mass audience.

		Ideological reach	
		Narrow	Wide
Geographic reach	Narrow	Partisan press	Penny press
	Wide	Opinion press	Professional press

[5] Marcus Daniel, Scandal and Civility: Journalism and the Birth of American Democracy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 5.

The new opinion press can be ideological because technology has provided a means for cable networks and web sites to survive on a very narrow audience by making physical distance irrelevant. The new media goes beyond making web sites for people who are Republicans *or* gays and makes viable site for people who are Republican *and* gay. Gay Republicans can communicate effectively through the "Blog Cabin" blog of the Log Cabin Republicans, effectively demonstrating that pretty small subgroups can be effectively networked.

The disconnection of media from geographic restraints may produce new challenges. In the era of the partisan press, publishers might be writing to a narrow audience politically, but they still lived in the community and constrained by social norms. Today, the publisher and audience can function politically in a sphere independent of their other communities. Writers and editors can now live at a safe distance from their targets and the fallout of the passions they stir.

Media unraveling

Unraveling theory says that interest groups will begin losing membership when they are dominated by a narrow group.[6] An interest group begins "unraveling" as the group is pulled toward some extreme. This makes more moderate members leave the group leading to the group decision becoming even more extreme in the future with the new move toward the extreme leading even more moderate members to leave.

[6] Paul E. Johnson, Unraveling in Democratically Governed Groups, Rationality and Society, Vol. 2, No. 1, 4-34 (1990).

This downward spiral could occur in the audiences of media outlets that pursue an ideological market. As the programming leaves the middle of the spectrum and captures a more ideological audience, they will lose audience members from different perspectives and narrow their audience further. The remaining audience might encourage even more narrow messages that would drive even more viewers away.

A variation of this may prove true for the public square in general. Many Americans already feel discouraged and alienated. As nasty fringe voices become louder, this may drive moderates from the political dialog, leaving the remaining debate in the hands of an even less representative set of voices.

Hatin' presidents for fun and profit

A "hater" is someone who is jealous of someone else's success and makes negative comments about others. It was used in its classic sense on Jan. 20, 2009 – Obama's inauguration day – on the Wall Street Journal Web site, in response to critics of Obama's speech a Californian wrote: "Don't be hating! What's happening right now is historical!"[7]

Hatin' fits the highly partisan and personalized debates built by the modern opinion media. By the end of the Bush administration, politics had so effectively organized around disliking Bush that even Republican McCain felt compelled to campaign as a change from a president of his party. There is nothing new about angry attacks. However, the term "hater" has emerged at a moment in which hating has become a lucrative full-time occupation thanks to our modern "unraveled" media. The narrow markets enabled by the Internet and

[7] Carl Cannon, "Hatin' on Obama," PoliticsDaily.com, 9/08/2009.

cable news have made hating a sustainable enterprise. With a ready-made audience, negative sells better than ever.

The hate industry is a bipartisan enterprise. Further, hatin' on Obama may not translate into gains for Republicans. Opposition to Obama has been defined by an ideologically unruly mob that sometimes embarrasses Republican officeholders who need to build a broader electoral coalition. And, while these attacks have successfully aided derailing some of Obama's ideas, they do not necessarily advance Republican policies. The legend of "death panels" will likely haunt any party's attempt to deal with health care. Democrats are portrayed as handing the reaper's scythe to government bureaucrats while Republican pass it to large, impersonal corporations. Like a spreading wild fire, the incendiary language of haters can easily spread beyond the control of any party.

The "birther" movement may be a model of issue that remains a constant in politics. It's unlikely that this story would have gained much audience in a more restrictive media environment. Further, the nature of the birther movement illustrates the lack of benefit to either party. While some Republicans may have briefly enjoyed the sideshow created by these questions, some quickly realized that their serious and somewhat complicated objections to the costs of health care reform could be overshadowed by a specious issue or undermined by association with less reasonable and relevant arguments. Republican leaders seemed to grasp that an investment in a losing issue like Obama's birth certificate debate might come at the expense of the party's credibility on policy issues. Further, while a few people on the far right might be motivated by the birth certificate question, few independents could be won over compared to concerns like deficit spending.

With the media invested in hating, there is less room for building compromise and consensus. President Obama will find it harder co-opt Fox News because doing so upsets much of their audience. Audiences brought in by or accustomed to attacks on the other side may become restless with a real dialogue with an established adversary. Our political system relies on compromise while our new media system profits from division. The compromises needed to govern may find themselves unwelcome in the new media.

Hatin' for all

Much of the tension passing through the pipes of the Internet really isn't new. Americans have always enjoyed nurturing and proclaiming their hostilities about political and sports rivals. However, the Internet has made confronting those people easier and offending large numbers of people more efficient.

The anonymity of the new public square may be its most corrosive aspects. Blogger and commenters can be anonymous or hide behind false names. Unencumbered by social norms, many people make the fullest use of freedom of speech. Columns at Politics Daily reflecting on the lives and contributions of Ted Kennedy and Irving Kristol each drew their share of extremely nasty comments the day after their deaths. Both men were enthusiastically relegated to Hell by their detractors.

However, people don't have to be anonymous to be hateful. When the President posted what have been highly controversial Thanksgiving greeting of: "From my family to yours — Happy Thanksgiving" among the 11,445 comments Facebook "fan" Caleb Adam posted (28 times): "cant stand you obama, i cant stand you i cant stand you i cant stand you you make me sick and i want to VOMIT you out of my mind and out of my mouth ... I think

you are a lying piece of garbage, and you are a disgrace to this great nation. I can't believe your sorry self , unpatriotic bigot who thinks he can say that we are no longer a christian nation , made it to the presidency."

Much of the hate on the Internet is purely recreational. Many of the comments on Internet new sites and have more of the flavor of the taunts of angry sports fans than a political dialog. For many commenters, news items and analysis seem to be largely a premise hurling insults and the discussion seldom goes beyond slapping a few labels on others. For such people, the blogs are not news any more than a college football pregame show. The audience is seeking out experts to tell them that they are right about their allegiances. Experts who disagree are attacked personally and while the cause of agreeable experts is taken up with vicious counter-attacks.

While the rants of a relatively few disturbed individuals does not fairly reflect the tone of the debate overall, it is unavoidable that a these messages will not have some impact and either stir contempt or inspire alienation. A screed against Obama's Thanksgiving message or wishing Irving Kristol into the bowels of Hell may have little direct impact. However, such attacks help perpetuate incivility and draw people away from issues.

Does new media matter?

One important question is whether or not new media use has a significant impact on the political system. After all, if no one is reading these sources, or if new media is only providing an outlet for the angry disaffected loners who can't afford violent video games,

the impact on governing will be minimal. However, use is increasingly broad-based with Internet sources mentioned as a source of national news by 42% of people.[8]

Increasingly, the new media office includes decision makers. A 2009 Nation Journal survey of Washington insiders found that 62% read blogs and that 54% of those who read blogs found them useful for "providing a window in to the tone and tenor of issues discussions."[9]

Living with Factcheck.org in a Post-Fact Society

Fact checking sites like Factcheck.org and Politifact.com are a mixed blessing for the Obama White House. While these sites have attempted to disprove some of the most obnoxious rumors about the President and his health care agenda, these sites have challenged White House statements and proven a distraction even when they generally support the President's claims.

These web sites check and challenge presidential assertions even before the President's message can sink in. The air of authority of the White House previously enjoyed now faces a steady stream of challenges and seems doomed by a new rival. Whereas Cronkite waited years before challenging the White House on the war in Vietnam, the president's "credibility gap" is now constructed and measured daily. Reporters and citizens in the past have tended to accept administration claims at face value and report rather than

[8] The Pew Center for the People and the Press, "Public Evaluations of the News Media: 1985-2009" September 12, 2009, 4.
[9] Will Englund, "The D.C. Digerati," National Journal, 12/5/2009, 42.

challenge what presidents said. Even when they did check presidential speeches, the delay gave the president's claims time to settle into the public mind, making it hard to dislodge.

The virtues of more truthful presidential leadership are clear. However, reality doesn't always favor presidential leadership. There may be no more rosy scenarios or optimistic assumptions flowing from the president's rhetoric. Presidents will be called on the carpet when they exercise dramatic license and it's not clear what fact checking would have done to the claim that "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Conclusion

Woodrow Wilson and others have identified the president as the single unifying figure in American politics, but the bully pulpit is not so bully anymore and the presidency of the new millennium looks unfortunately like the presidency of the Gilded Age. The president's role in uniting the nation remains central; However, the energy of the new media seems to be pushing American politics back into its natural state of entropy.

The monolithic media prevalent in the latter half of the twentieth century helped gloss over divisions and the new media seems even more adept at highlighting these differences and sharpening attacks on keeping the nation's factions apart. The new media will contribute to the decentralization of media power in America. Even with a brilliant White House orchestrating the message, the bigger the herd the harder the roundup.

The idea that leading may be getting harder rather than easier is even more interesting given recent research that indicates that presidential influence over the public was never been as strong as we believed. George Edwards has offered a provocative

counter-argument to Neustadt's "power to persuade" argument and offered evidence that the president is seldom persuasive.

The rantings of opinion journalist in digital form or in books may sell well among a core audience, but they alienate moderate voters and lead readers away from legitimate debates. If Glenn Beck cries wolf (or just cries) too often, few people will notice when he actually stumbles upon a real issue. In the meantime, these opinion noise makers will have help drive away the traditional investigative journalists capable of writing serious investigative stories. Real reform related to campaign finance, bureaucratic accountability, and other institutional flaws may be pushed aside by media tail chasing over minor personal scandals with little long-term significance.

Scholars are left to sort out the role of the American president. If Edwards' argument takes root we may see a greatly diminished image of the president's role and we need to grapple with why a political system so focused on the president listens so little to its occupants.

Especially in a forum on the presidency, it will be tempting to look to the president to solve some of the problems with polarization and incivility. Presidents have certainly contributed to the problem or failed to smooth the waters. However, much of the problem emanates from citizens. Either as members of the audiences egging on the worst behaved talking heads or more directly through their own blogs and comments in online forums, Americans continue to create many of the problems they complain about.