# Parties and the Media
## Getting Messages to Voters

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Parties must communicate messages to voters. Otherwise, they cannot maintain and mobilize their base, expand their electoral coalition, persuade swing voters, and build a long-term party image. The information and messages to which citizens are exposed affect what they think about issues, candidates, and the parties themselves. And in an era of an unceasing flow of political information, parties and candidates that are unsuccessful in communicating with and persuading the public will have little chance of winning elections and turning their proposals into policy.

Just 20 years ago, the political communication game consisted largely of developing television advertising strategies and direct mail campaigns and convincing print and broadcast reporters to deliver the messages the parties wanted the public to hear. By no means easy, the process was well understood. Not so today.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the transformation of the media environment that has altered American society is also presenting unprecedented challenges for political parties and candidates. The number of news outlets has exploded. Audiences are gradually moving away from traditional media and toward newer venues, like 24-hour cable news channels, a sea of Web sites trading in political information, and seemingly every day a new kind of social media—YouTube, Facebook, Twitter. With the news audience increasingly fragmented, political parties must navigate a communications landscape whose contours are continually shifting.

This chapter provides an overview of the transformation of the media environment in recent decades, highlights the consequences for parties, and discusses their emerging responses. My primary argument is that the new media environment presents parties with new opportunities to communicate with their core, committed supporters. This has facilitated fundraising, the recruitment of volunteers, and mobilization. But the persuasive value of these new venues is limited because their audiences tend to be comprised largely of partisans, not independents and swing voters. To win over uncommitted voters, parties must continue to rely on traditional forms of media communication—television advertising and attempting to communicate to the larger public through the mass media, whose audiences continue to be large. A strategy that effectively pairs messages with the appropriate venue and audience is central to party success.

## The Current Landscape: A Media Environment in Transition

As late as the early 1980s, American consumers had just a handful of choices for political news. They could subscribe to their local newspaper. They could buy a national newspaper, like the *New York Times*. They could read Time or Newsweek. They could listen to brief news summaries on the radio. They could watch their local evening news, or they could tune in to one of the broadcast networks to see Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, and Peter Jennings report the day's political developments. At a glance, such a menu may seem ample. But compared to what the public has at its disposal today, the media fare of just a few years ago looks downright paltry.

Today, political information is available at any time of the day, from a dizzying array of outlets. No longer do Americans wait for the slap of the newspaper on the driveway or until 6:30 p.m. for a TV news update. Cable news channels blare their headlines 24 hours a day. Major news Web sites update their content nearly every minute. There is an ever-growing roll of Internet sites and blogs trading in political news and commentary. The Huffington Post, Drudge Report, and Politico, to name three, claim millions of visitors each month (Kafka 2008; Shea 2008; Sherman 2009). Consumers can access political information at home on TV, and at the office or the gym on their Blackberrys and iPhones. This is not to say that the current environment offers political news of superior quality. But political information is today more voluminous and more accessible than at any time in the history of the world.

Data from the Pew Research Center in Figure 4.1 reveal the significant changes in Americans' media habits over the last two decades. In 1993, 58 percent of Americans claimed to have read a newspaper the previous day, 44 percent listened to the radio, 42 percent said they regularly watched the national network news, and more than three-quarters (77 percent) regularly watched their local news. While the absolute levels of media exposure are inflated—Americans tell pollsters they pay more attention to the news than they actually do (Prior 2009)—the over time trends illustrate the extent to which traditional forms of news have ebbed from people's daily routines. By 2008, 34 percent of Americans reported to be newspaper readers; just 35 percent listened to the radio; network news consumption had declined to 29 percent. And local news viewership was down to a slim majority, 52 percent. In the mid-1990s the average American claimed to be a newspaper reader and national television news viewer. No longer is that true.
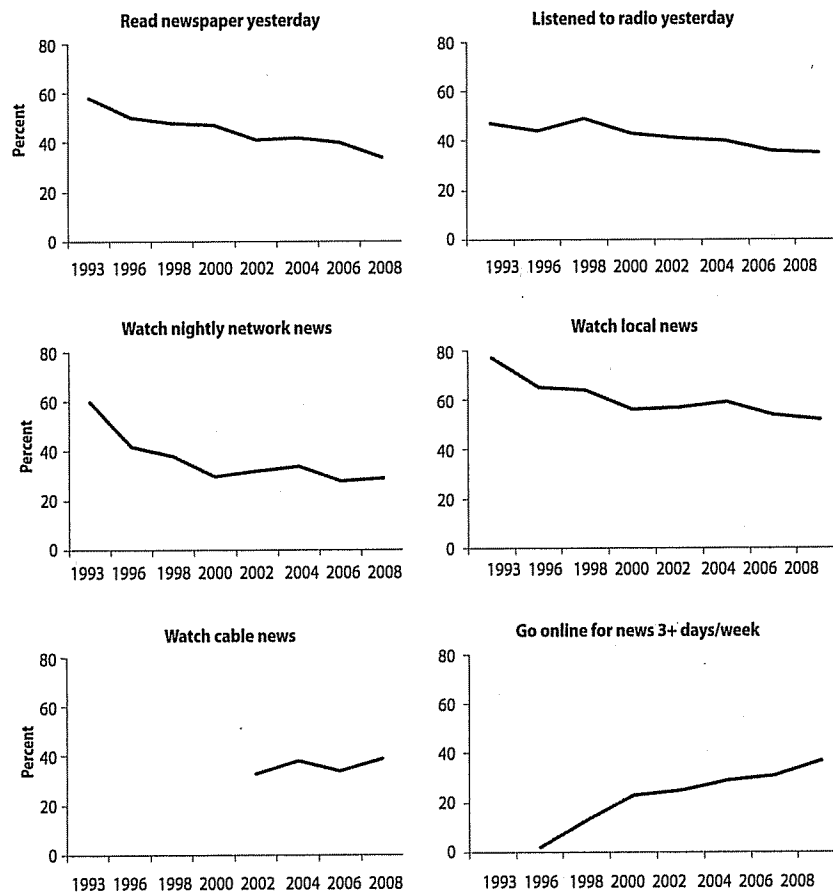
*Figure 4.1*   Americans' Changing News Consumption Habits. Source: Pew Research Center Surveys, 1993–2008. Data are compiled in the Pew Research Center report "Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources" (http://people-press.org/report/444/news-media).

Citizens have not abandoned the news, but they have turned to new outlets. CNN, the first all-news cable network, broadcast its first newscast in 1980, and cable expanded as a source for political news with the entrance of Fox News to the market in the mid-1990s. The Pew data presented here track Americans' cable news consumption only since 2002, and the major growth in market share occurred earlier. But, the proportion of Americans, even in the last six years, who regularly watch cable news, has risen on average about a percentage point each year, from 33 to 39 percent. At the same time, the increase in online news consumption has been dramatic. In 1996, when few news organizations had a web presence, 2 percent said they went online for news at least three

days a week. By the summer of 2008, more than one third of the country—37 percent—was getting its news fix on the Internet. As the number of sources of political information has proliferated, the news audience has gravitated to them.

What are the consequences of these changes for political parties? Why does it matter where Americans get their news from? In what ways have these developments provided new opportunities for parties to communicate their ideas?

## Direct and Mediated Communication with the Public

Parties find themselves confronting an ever-evolving media landscape that requires complex and diversified communication strategies. The splintering of the news audience makes it harder to reach large segments of the electorate through mass media (Tewksbury 2005). Individuals can selectively attend to information sources that cater to their political taste. And some people may opt out of political news entirely, preferring to spend their leisure time perusing a rich menu of entertainment choices (Prior 2007). As a result, parties must not only continue to use tactics of an older era—a heavy emphasis on television advertising and courting the media in the hopes of generating "free" news coverage that has a wide audience—but also tap into the technological capabilities of new media. Success in both of these endeavors is required to mount effective communications campaigns.

We can understand the challenges parties face by considering two types of communication—direct and mediated communication. Direct communication involves messages that are created by party elites, primarily party leaders and candidates, and communicated directly to citizens. Traditionally, these have been comprised of television advertising and direct mail, but technological developments have allowed parties to engage in new forms of electronic direct communication. Mediated communication consists of messages that emanate from party elites but are transmitted to voters by someone else, most importantly journalists. Despite the waning of mass media audiences, this type of communication remains critical for parties and candidates. The new media environment has also created a new venue—what I will call "allied media"—that provides another outlet for candidate and party messages.

### Direct Communication

Direct communication is especially valuable because it allows parties and candidates to disseminate messages precisely in the form they want, when they want, to whom they want, and without distortion. The most important form of direct political communication is television advertising. When Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign wanted residents of Cleveland to see an ad about the Illinois Senator's economic plan, for instance, they didn't have to

wait for the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer* to publish an article about his ideas. All they needed to do was buy air time in the Cleveland market and run an ad—many times—about his proposals to bring jobs and prosperity to the region.

Television advertising, the single biggest expense for national campaigns, has contributed to the increasing, and astonishing, cost of political campaigns. In 2008, the Obama campaign spent an estimated $230 million on television advertising (Schouten 2008), breaking the 2004 record of $188 million set by George W. Bush's presidential campaign (Rutenberg 2008). The McCain campaign and the Republican National Committee spent around $130 million on TV ads. Obama won about 70 million votes on Election Day, meaning that he spent about $3.20 per vote in advertising dollars; McCain spent about $2.15 in TV advertising for each of his 60 million votes. When House, Senate, and state campaigns are included, the total advertising budget for political campaigns in 2008 was in the billions.[1]

Television advertising strategies have become increasingly sophisticated and fine-tuned in recent years, with campaigns designing ads to target specific segments of the electorate (West 2005). Not only do campaign ads give candidates unparalleled control over their messages, but they also give them valuable flexibility in directing their messages to audiences where they will be most effective. Ads about unemployment run in Ohio, for instance, and ads focusing on immigration and the environment run in Colorado. In presidential campaigns, candidates rarely spend money advertising in uncompetitive states, allocating their resources to media markets in battleground states, where vote shifts have a bearing on Electoral College support (Shaw 2006). Consultants also design strategies to run ads on particular programs with particular audiences. Turn on the local news during campaign season, and you're likely to see a political ad. Watch MTV for an hour, and you probably won't see any ads at all. Parties and candidates hunt where the ducks are, airing messages that will be seen by potential voters. People who watch television news tend to turn out at high rates; young people—the vast majority of MTV's audience—do not, so candidates run ads during the local news, not *The Hills*.

Television advertising and direct mail have been augmented in recent years by new forms of electronic communication. Party and candidate e-mail lists, Web sites, and, more recently, social networking sites like Facebook are now used to reach out to voters. These tools have been rapidly incorporated into modern campaigns in large part because of their cost: They're cheap. Compared to television advertising, messages can be made available on a Web site or e-mail list for a pittance.

All the major presidential campaigns since 1996 have operated Web sites. Candidates for other offices rapidly followed suit. By 2004, Web sites had become "virtually mandatory" for candidates running for Congress (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, 426), with 81 percent of U.S. House candidates and 92 percent of Senate candidates maintaining web pages (Foot and Schneider 2006), a figure that had climbed even higher by 2008. Politicians have

even begun to embrace Twitter, a site where users post 140-character updates throughout the day.[2]

These methods permit politicians to efficiently communicate with their base. Most of the people who visit candidate Web sites, sign up for party e-mails, or join candidate social networking communities are supporters of the party or candidate—otherwise, they would not be inclined to seek out online communication with politicians. During campaigns, candidates and parties regularly send "campaign updates" and appeals for donations over their e-mail listserves. John McCain and Barack Obama's supporters were regularly updated on the candidates' activities during the 2008 campaign. And Obama pioneered what will probably become a common tactic of making important announcements to his supporters online—such as his choice of Joe Biden as his vice presidential running mate—before announcing them to the press and wider public.

These electronic communication efforts have assisted parties in raising money from activists and supporters and mobilizing and organizing geographically disparate supporters across the country. Howard Dean's Democratic primary campaign in 2004 was the first example of the organizing power of the web to spur the "netroots"—the online equivalent of traditional grassroots supporters—to action.[3] The research on Internet political communication is still in its nascent stages. But some work has shown that the Web has assisted campaigns in raising money, recruiting volunteers (Hindman 2005), and mobilizing supporters (e.g., Kreuger 2006). A recent study suggests that text messaging may hold promise as a way to get out the vote, with turnout being higher among young people who were sent text message reminders to vote (Dale and Strauss 2009).

The Internet and the growing availability of electronic information have also allowed parties to more narrowly target their appeals to specific voters. Both the Republican and Democratic parties, and several prominent consultants, now maintain large voter databases that include information about Americans' turnout and donation history, as well as demographic information and consumer profiles. The goal is to use this information to narrowly tailor communications campaigns with messages that parties think might appeal to specific individuals. Known as "microtargeting," the tactic allows candidates to design messages based on what surveys or consumer behavior data tell researchers those individuals are likely to be concerned about.

For example, survey data may tell a campaign that married mothers in suburban East coast cities tend to be concerned about terrorism. A campaign can then use its voter information databases to design a piece of direct mail or e-mail message about terrorism to only the people who fit this profile. Another message—on, say, gun control—can be sent to voters who fit a different demographic or political profile. Parties even greet visitors to their Web sites with different content, depending on the user's geographic location or other personal information (Howard 2006). Hillygus and Shields (2008)

suggest that microtargeting helps campaigns use "wedge" issues—issues that drive a stake between a party supporter and their party's candidate—to try to peel off weakly committed voters from an opponent. The effectiveness of microtargeting remains uncertain—one of the pioneers of the method, Mark Penn, presided over Hillary Clinton's 2008 Democratic primary defeat—but there is little doubt that technological capabilities and the growing stores of information about voters at parties' disposal will make the tactic a part of the political toolbox in the years to come. Hillygus and Shields (2008, 198) write, "[A]s technological advances continue to change the political landscape at an exponential pace, we expect to see candidates attempting to find and use even more detailed information about individual voters."

## The Communications Limitations of New Media

Technological developments have facilitated direct communication with the most engaged and informed segments of the electorate (e.g., Boogers and Voerman 2003; Xenos and Moy 2007), people who tend to have the most stable and well-formed political attitudes (Zaller 1992). These individuals tend to be faithful partisans, whose support for a candidate or party is largely immune to political messages, no matter the communications venue. But using the new media to reach independents and swing voters, whose loyalties candidates covet, is much harder.

Data from a Pew Research Center survey conducted in November 2008 confirm the largely partisan profile of the online political community. Table 4.1 presents the percentage of Americans who reported interacting in various ways with political campaigns on the Internet. The data are broken down by

Table 4.1  Americans' New Media Use, by Partisanship

|  | Dem | Lean Dem | Ind | Lean Rep | Rep |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Visited Obama/Biden web site (N=1,487) | 41% | 40% | 15% | 26% | 21% |
| Visited McCain/Palin web site (N=1,487) | 16 | 21 | 13 | 24 | 31 |
| Received e-mail from candidate or party (N=1,495) | 44 | 39 | 26 | 35 | 38 |
| Got political information from Facebook or MySpace (N=416) | 29 | 24 | 2 | 7 | 25 |
| "Friended" a candidate or party on Facebook or MySpace (N=416) | 18 | 16 | 0 | 2 | 9 |

Note: N of respondents to Facebook/MySpace questions reflect only respondents who said they used social networking sites. Independents are defined only as respondents who said they did not lean toward one party or the other.
Source: Pew Research Center Survey, November 2008.

party identification, with categories for self-described Democrats and Republicans, independents who reported "leaning" toward one party, and independents who expressed no preference for either party.[4] This allows us to examine the relationship between partisanship and online political activity.

Two patterns are evident in the table.[5] First, partisans are far more likely to interact with the parties online than are independents. For each activity, the percentage of respondents visiting candidate Web sites, receiving e-mails, and engaging with the candidates on Facebook or MySpace is lowest among self-described independents. The fraction of partisans doing so is much higher. For example, while just 15 percent of independents visited the Obama/Biden Web site, 40 percent of Democrats (and leaners) did. Even about a quarter of Republicans and GOP leaners visited the Democrats' site. The divide is evident, though less pronounced, for McCain/Palin's site and receiving e-mail from a candidate or party. But the key point is that about 85 percent of independents avoided the candidates' Web pages, and three quarters said they never received e-mail from a campaign or party.

The Pew surveys also asked respondents whether they used a social networking site, such as Facebook or MySpace. Those who did were asked about their political activities on the pages. While 29 percent of Democrats and 25 percent of Republicans said they had gotten political information from a social networking site, a paltry 2 percent of independents said they had. And the pattern is even clearer when Facebook and MySpace users were asked about their engagement with the party and candidate pages. Not a single independent in the survey said they had "friended" a candidate or party during the campaign. The candidates' Facebook friends might be better termed family members.[6]

Second, the more partisan a voter is, the more likely he is to be exposed to party communications. In all but two cases, self-avowed partisans were more likely to say they had interacted with the parties and candidates online than those who leaned toward one of the parties. This is partly because partisans tend to be more interested in politics. Thus, they are more engaged with politics, online or otherwise. But the Internet also provides unparalleled opportunities for "selective exposure," a concept that describes people's tendency to seek out information that confirms beliefs they already hold and avoid information that challenges those attitudes (Festinger 1957; Klapper 1960).

Visits to the candidate Web sites illustrate how politically motivated Internet users can wall themselves off from information that challenges their attitudes. First, the percentage of Democrats saying they had visited the Obama/Biden site—41 percent—was about twice as large as the share of Republicans (21 percent). The reverse was true for McCain/Palin, with 31 percent of Republicans and 16 percent of Democrats reporting a visit. Just as interesting, Democratic leaners were more likely than Democrats to visit the McCain/Palin site, and Republican leaners were more likely than Republicans to visit Obama/Biden's page. On every other question, more partisans reported online activity than leaners. But not when it came to looking at their party's opponent's Web

site. Some citizens may use the Internet to gather information from a variety of political perspectives. But most probably do not. Instead, the Web serves as a nearly perfect selective exposure machine.[7]

Clearly, what parties can accomplish with these emerging direct communications technology is limited. New tools help parties deliver messages to their core supporters, or to other activists and journalists (Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007). But because it is nearly impossible to reach independent and swing voters through these channels, the persuasive value of new forms of direct communication is currently minimal. If more independents in the future turn to these sites for information, they may prove useful for winning over uncommitted voters. But given the well-documented tendency of undecided voters to rely primarily on information they encounter serendipitously in their daily lives—through the news and entertainment media and conversations with acquaintances, for example—the utility of new media will remain limited for reaching voters whose minds parties want to change. To communicate with these people, campaigns must continue to use television advertising as well as traditional forms of media communication, especially the news media, which possess a broad reach.

### Mediated Communication

We come now to the second form of party communication, mediated communication. Its key characteristic is that parties relinquish control over the dissemination of the message—they can't dictate whether, or the manner in which, information is portrayed to public. The most important type of mediated communication involves party messages that are transmitted to the public through the news media. But the success in getting the media to disseminate messages depends on parties' ability to tap into journalistic preferences and standards of newsworthiness. Two anecdotes from the 2004 presidential campaign illustrate just how seriously parties take this process.

In the late summer, Democratic nominee John Kerry and his campaign aides undertook an unusual strategy to win the attention of the news media. Rather than adhering to the time-honored tactic of delivering the same stump speech day after day, Kerry's campaign rolled out several of its major policy initiatives—on health care, national security, and the like—in a series of "issue weeks" (Benedetto 2004; Nagourney 2004). Knowing that the media are apt to ignore oft-repeated policy statements, the campaign's hope was to guarantee at least some coverage of their chosen issue by concentrating attention on it within one or two news cycles. The strategy presumably emerged from the Kerry camp's view that special measures were needed to overcome the tendency of reporters to ignore the issues that candidates talk about (Lockhart quoted in Jamieson 2005, 140–49).

Meanwhile, the Bush campaign was just as acutely aware of the preferences and incentives of the news media, and, critically, the way they influence cov-

erage. Mark McKinnon, George W. Bush's chief media advisor, told PBS that the campaign's choices about how to publicize issues were directly related to its understanding of what the press considers newsworthy: "We can go out in campaigns, and we'll try and strategize: 'Let's go do a press conference on our policy on the environment. Let's go to a manufacturing plant and talk about our economic plan'—zero coverage, or the back of page D17," he said. "But we do the story attacking Kerry—page 1."[8]

Campaigns view the news media as major players in communicating with the public. And with good reason: The mainstream news audience is huge. Even with the proliferation of new media outlets, more than 23 million people each night still watch one of the three network newscasts, dwarfing the prime time cable news audience. In 2008—a year of widespread newspaper closures and newsroom cuts—48 million Americans still subscribed to a daily paper.[9] And those figures do not include people who regularly read a national network's Web content or visit mainstream newspaper sites, a group that is substantial.

Moreover, in contrast to the audience for candidate Web sites and e-mail lists, the mass media audience contains large numbers of persuadable voters. Table 4.2 shows American National Election Studies (ANES) data on respondents' exposure to traditional media.[10] The survey, conducted in the fall of 2008, asked how many days in the previous week respondents watched national network news, afternoon/evening local news, read a newspaper, and listened to news on the radio. To simplify things, I present the percentage of respondents who reported at least three days per week of exposure, which strikes me as a reasonable indicator of habitual viewing.[11] The data are broken down by level of partisanship, using the traditional seven-point party identification scale. Unlike the Pew data in Table 4.1, the ANES distinguishes between "strong" and "weak" partisans.

Just as in Table 4.1, Table 4.2 reveals two patterns. First, there is again evidence that the citizens most attentive to the news are also the most partisan. About 70 percent of self-identified strong Democrats said they regularly watched national network news, 68 percent said they watched the local news, and 41 percent said they read a newspaper. About 70 percent of strong Republicans reported watching national news, 54 percent said they watched local news, and 47 percent said they read the newspaper and listened to the radio. In most cases, these figures were the highest for any of the partisan categories. As noted earlier, the absolute levels of exposure should be interpreted cautiously, because Prior (2009) has shown that self-reported measures of media exposure reveal an "immensely inflated" news audience when those data are compared to Nielsen ratings data. But since the focus here is the comparison across categories—not the precise levels of exposure—we can be confident that the more partisan a person is, the more likely he is to pay attention to the news.

Second, unlike online forms of communication, traditional media have a substantial audience of independents. While independents are less interested

*Table 4.2* Americans' Use of Traditional Media 3+ Days Per Week, by Partisanship

|  | Strong Dem | Weak Dem | Lean Dem | Ind | Lean Rep | Weak Rep | Strong Rep |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| National network news (N=1,108) | 70% | 50% | 49% | 45% | 62% | 45% | 68% |
| Early local news (N=1,111) | 68 | 46 | 47 | 35 | 56 | 41 | 54 |
| Read newspaper (N=1,111) | 41 | 40 | 40 | 30 | 35 | 44 | 47 |
| Listen to radio news (N=1,110) | 33 | 42 | 35 | 39 | 35 | 54 | 47 |

*Note:* Figures represent the percentage of individuals in each partisan category saying they used traditional media at least three days per week.

*Source:* 2008 American National Election Studies.

in public affairs than partisans, 45 percent report watching the national network news at least three days a week, 35 percent watch local news, 30 percent read a newspaper, and 39 percent listen to radio news. These numbers are substantially higher than for independent visits to candidate Web sites or Facebook pages. For example, compare Table 4.2 to Table 4.1, where the percentage of independents interacting with politics online was never higher than 26 percent. If a major part of campaign strategy involves peeling off voters who are not fully committed to one candidate (Hillygus and Shields 2008; Shaw 1999), then parties have a substantial incentive to attempt to use the mass media to send messages to these people.

## Do the Media Pay Attention to Party Messages?

But it is not only the news media's reach that makes them valuable. News coverage carries credibility with the public that a candidate ad or party-sponsored message does not. Citizens often have a skeptical view of statements from politicians—their messages are, after all, self-serving—but may be more receptive to information that emanates from the news media, at least among those who view them as trustworthy sources (Hayes 2008; Ladd 2009; Miller and Krosnick 2000). Thus, having the news media transmit strategic messages is of considerable value for political parties.

The problem for politicians, however, is that the media are unreliable messengers, as the tactics of the Bush and Kerry campaigns should make clear. Sometimes the media reflect candidate messages, sometimes they distort them, and sometimes they ignore them entirely. Only when party messages are perceived as newsworthy will journalists pay attention to them. This produces constant conflict between the two groups, which are faced with the persistently frustrating reality that they need each other.

Parties want the media to deliver their preferred messages, unfiltered and unaltered. They want news that places the focus on the issues and events that they believe will benefit their cause. They want news that portrays their candidate in a favorable light and the other side in a negative light. In other words, parties want one-sided, biased news coverage that emphasizes their preferred issue agenda.

The norms and practices of journalism, however, demand that news be two-sided and balanced (Bennett 2009; Graber 2006; Tuchman 1972). Reporters are not interested in serving as tools of politicians. This means that only in rare circumstances will the news reflect one side's preferred agenda. This is not to say that journalists ignore everything parties want them to hear. To be sure, the media need politicians to make news for them; candidates' statements and actions are the raw material for news stories. But party and candidate messages are likely to get through the media filter only when those messages can be transmitted as part of large newsworthy narrative. This is why the Kerry campaign sought to portray its issue announcements as "new" developments each week, and why the Bush campaign made sure to attack Kerry when they wanted front-page coverage for an event. Novelty and conflict are two central parts of the definition of newsworthiness, and those standards have a lot do with when party messages get through, and when they don't.

Realizing this, candidates and parties expend considerable energy trying to get reporters to reflect their campaign messages. Modern campaigns are replete with "pseudo events" (Boorstin 1961)—events, activities, and photo-ops created largely for media consumption. Examples abound. Consider a camouflaged John Kerry in October 2004 parading out of an Ohio wood, dead goose in tow, in an effort to communicate (through the resulting news photos) his embrace of ordinary Americans' values and to dispel notions that he was an elitist. Or John McCain's June 2008 visit to a Bagdad market to highlight the success of the American troop "surge" in Iraq, which the Arizona Senator had advocated. Barack Obama's entire July 2008 trip abroad, including a widely publicized speech in Berlin, was as much a media event as a foreign policy junket. And though not explicitly a campaign event, George W. Bush's tailhook landing on an aircraft carrier in May 2003 was designed (prematurely, it turned out) to underscore the success of the Iraq War and his wartime commander-in-chief image (Bennett 2009, 45–48).

These events were staged primarily for the benefit of the media, whose stories and images the parties hoped would amplify the same messages each camp was also emphasizing in its advertising campaigns. The strategy seems well-founded, as candidate messages are more likely to be effective in shaping voter attitudes when the news media reflect those themes (Hayes 2008; though see Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). If candidates hope to set voters' agendas and shape their views of candidates, they will benefit when their messages are

amplified by the news media.[12] "Campaigns that are successful are able to couple those," says Democratic consultant Joe Lockhart (Jamieson 2005, 146).

While the media are rarely consistently faithful to candidate agendas (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Patterson 1994; Vavreck 2009; though see Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, and Koetzle 1998 and Just et al. 1996 for an alternative conclusion), variations in the type of media outlet, campaign activity, and electoral context can increase the likelihood that candidates will have their messages transmitted to the public.

For instance, print outlets are much more responsive to candidate discourse than broadcast media (Hayes forthcoming; Ridout and Mellen 2007), in part because they have more space and are less reliant on visuals.[13] Paradoxically, the media also appear more responsive to candidate agendas when an election is less competitive. When races tighten, the level of convergence between candidate and news agendas declines, because the media find other topics to report on—the horse race, campaigns' strategic maneuvering, the importance of wedge issues—rather than what the candidates are saying on the campaign trail (Hayes forthcoming).

The potential for conflict and drama also may influence when the media reflect candidate agendas. When candidates stake out diverging positions on the same issue, the resulting conflict lends itself to the narrative storytelling that is the cornerstone of political journalism (Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Schudson 1996). Being able to "pit" candidates' statements against one another increases the news value of campaign discourse, making it more likely that a candidate's message will be reported (Hayes forthcoming). For example, in June 2008, the first extended reporting of Barack Obama and John McCain's issue positions in the postprimary period occurred as each candidate criticized the other's economic policy in speeches on the same day. While other factors, such as rapidly deteriorating economic numbers, contributed to the high level of convergence, the candidates' attacks on one another no doubt made the story irresistible to reporters. As Tucker Eskew, senior strategist for the 2004 Bush campaign, puts it, the media are "biased for conflict" (quoted in Jamieson 2005, 156).

These findings suggest that it is not fruitful to think of media responsiveness to candidate agendas as an "either/or" proposition. The extent to which the media transmit candidate messages depends on a variety of factors, including the political context and the strategies of the candidates themselves. The next question, then, is so what? Why does it matter whether the media attend to or ignore party and candidate messages?

## The Effect of Media Messages on Voter Attitudes

For decades, political scientists believed that the media served only to reinforce people's views—they had little power to alter political attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. Despite the thorough penetration of American society by the

mass media, the dominance of the "minimal effects" paradigm (e.g., Klapper 1960)—what Bartels (1993, 267) calls "one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science"—persisted into the latter decades of the twentieth century. But there is now consensus that the media messages matter greatly for voter attitudes and behavior, making it imperative for parties to try to influence news content (e.g., Hetherington 1996; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972; see Graber 2006, 182–217). The ability of parties to get the media to carry those messages can have major consequences.

The more attention the media devote to an issue, the more likely the public is to view that issue as important. This is the well-established agenda setting effect (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972). Agenda setting on its own matters greatly—what problems voters believe are important can shape perceptions of presidential mandates, legislative activity, and policy outputs. But in thinking about elections agenda setting is especially important as an antecedent to priming. Priming occurs when an issue or candidate characteristic that has been made salient to a voter—when that consideration has been "primed"—takes on greater weight in a political judgment, such as a vote choice (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Kinder and Krosnick 1990). When the media focus heavily on an issue such as the economy then economic considerations are made more accessible in voters' minds. Their vote decisions are more likely to reflect an evaluation of which candidate they believe will more effectively handle inflation and unemployment than if economic issues had not been primed. The importance of priming in campaigns has received considerable attention in recent years from political scientists and communication scholars, who have found it to have important consequences (Claibourn 2008; Druckman 2004). Theories of agenda control are premised on the idea that what people think about when they go into the voting booth shapes who they vote for (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Riker 1996).

Though it is still too early to precisely discern the role of the media in the 2008 campaign, it is likely that the issue agenda, dominated by the economy, was important to Obama's victory. McCain, a war hero with a widely known story of heroism from his time in Vietnam, would have preferred to focus the media and voters' attention on terrorism, foreign affairs, and questions of leadership. But his attempts to set the public's agenda throughout the summer of 2008 were stymied by a news media more concerned with the Obama campaign's hammering away at the Republican Party's responsibility for a faltering economy. Obama's message on the deteriorating economy appears to have been reported at a louder volume than McCain's leadership and foreign policy messages, a fact that was reflected in opinion polls that showed voters much more concerned with the economy than any other issue.[14] As a result, voters in 2008 were probably more likely to cast a ballot based on economic concerns than any other issue. Had the attention of the media been focused more on questions of leadership than the economy, it is conceivable that McCain would have fared better (though it seems unlikely he would have won, given

the dismal state of the economy and voters' association of him with George W. Bush). Early research into the 2008 campaign suggests the economy was indeed central to the outcome (e.g., Holbrook 2009; Linn, Moody, and Asper 2009).

It is not only issue salience that parties and candidates concern themselves with. The portrayal of candidates in the media can affect voters' attitudes toward them (Druckman and Parkin 2005; Hetherington 1996; Kahn and Kenney 2002; Shaw and Roberts 2000). Let's take an example from the 2000 presidential campaign. In that year, the Bush campaign made use of a series of questionable events Democrat Al Gore was involved in—the 1996 Buddhist temple fundraising scandal, a statement about his role in the development of the Internet, his comparison of his dog's prescription drug costs to his mother-in-law's, among others—to paint the Vice President as an untrustworthy politician willing to say anything to get elected (Jamieson and Waldman 2003, 41–60). The attacks ultimately ended in a major opinion shift, as voters in large numbers began to question his honesty and integrity (Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004).

Interestingly, it was not the Bush ad campaign or speeches that moved public opinion. Rather, the Bush attacks "supplied language that then infused news coverage of Gore in late September," Johnston et al. (2004, 119) write, "and a series of negative stories about Gore caused many citizens to reevaluate him." The news narrative "permanently transformed the terms of competition to Al Gore's disadvantage." In the razor-close election of 2000, the shift arguably cost Gore the presidency. The dynamic suggests that campaign communications are more effective when the messages are amplified by the press (Hayes 2008), which many citizens view as more credible sources than politicians themselves.

Ultimately, parties know that the media play a powerful role in shaping voter attitudes. The media can set voters' agendas, influence the criteria by which they choose candidates, and shape the favorability of perceptions of candidates. As a result, parties have an incentive to expend considerable effort trying to get the media to reflect their issue agendas, a task that requires constant strategizing, as evidenced by the Kerry and Bush campaign anecdotes noted above. A candidate who is successful in transmitting his or her messages through the media is more likely to reap benefits on Election Day than a candidate who cannot use the mass media to his or her advantage. This is especially true when candidates are in pursuit of swing voters who are not (yet) reachable in large numbers through new media outlets.

### A New Form of Mediated Communication: Allied Media

The complicated dance between politicians and journalists has been a standard feature of modern campaigns for decades. But the proliferation of outlets in the new media era has created a second type of mediated communication,

distinct from the traditional, nonpartisan journalism of the sort described above. The new category—what I will call "allied media," partisan or ideological information sources designed to amplify and promote party messages—has created a new venue for party communication. These sources include talk radio, ideological and partisan blogs, and overtly partisan media outlets or programs (e.g., The O'Reilly Factor, Countdown with Keith Olbermann).

In many ways, the current era is beginning to offer hints of the politics of the nineteenth century, a time when independent, nonpartisan journalism was not the norm. Most newspapers were affiliated with one political party or the other, and their content was designed to promote the party's ideas and fortunes. Editors were chosen not for their command of the language, but their loyalty to the party. News outlets were agents of partisan warfare. Such outlets are increasingly common today.

Beginning with the rise of political talk radio in the 1980s, and in particular the popularity of Rush Limbaugh's conservative talk show, continuing with the entrance of Fox News and its distinctively conservative brand of political coverage, and after consolidating the development of the Internet, there are now media outlets dedicated not to nonpartisan, balanced journalism, but a form of party advocacy (Jamieson and Cappella 2008). In recent years, MSNBC's prime time lineup—featuring former Democratic staffer Chris Matthews, Bush tormenter Keith Olbermann, and former Air America host Rachel Maddow—has developed into a liberal challenge to Fox News' conservative programming. And the left-leaning blogosphere has become to liberals what talk radio is to conservatives. To be sure, these outlets are not official organs of political parties and candidates—and importantly, they do not necessarily adhere to party doctrine or talking points—but they represent new venues for partisan communications to which citizens have access.

While these outlets are no doubt a relevant feature of the political environment, it is important not to overstate their importance. The average prime time cable news audience (combining Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN) in 2008 was about 4 million viewers, just a fraction of the broadcast networks' news audience.[15] In addition, their viewership is heavily populated by committed partisans. A Rasmussen Reports press release titled "News You Watch Says a Lot about How You'll Vote" reported that a survey in August 2008 showed that 87 percent of Fox News viewers planned to vote for John McCain. At the same time, 63 percent of MSNBC viewers and 65 percent of CNN viewers said they would vote for Barack Obama.[16] Perhaps useful for generating enthusiasm among hard-core party supporters, these outlets are unlikely to help parties expand their coalitions or win over swing voters.

The same limitations apply to the expanding blogosphere, which has become a forum for ideologically driven takes on the news. The vast majority of political blogs fall on the right or left—there are very few that offer a nonpartisan or centrist take on the news (Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell forthcoming). And the audience for political blogs remains relatively small—just 14 percent of the

public in 2006 said they read a political blog—so their relevance for the overall information environment is not clear. What is certain, however, is that these sites represent the increasing "balkanization" (Jamieson and Cappella 2008) of information sources in the media era. The proliferation of news sources has given partisan commentators a place to propagate their views, and a place for committed ideological followings to receive a friendly take on politics.

## Consequences of the Transformed Media Environment

Compared to the communications environment even two decades ago, the media landscape faced by political parties today is strikingly complex. The transformation of the media environment—and Americans' increasingly diverse media habits—has forced parties and candidates to develop new methods to communicate with voters. New media have provided opportunities to communicate with supporters who want to engage with the party in ways not seen since the era of machine politics. But because these new venues have only a limited capacity to reach swing voters and weaker partisans, traditional communications strategies—television advertising and the use of the news media, especially—remain critical to party communications efforts.

As we consider the future of political communication in the United States, we can envision several consequences of the changes in the media environment. First, as it grows ever more complex, parties will need to refine their communication strategies further. Increased segmentation of the electorate and the use of microtargeting (Hillygus and Shields 2008) may be a major part of that process. Parties will also likely develop new ways to use the Internet, including creating more opportunities for interactive communication between party leaders and the party faithful.

Second, news audiences will likely continue to fragment. As recently as the 1980s, Americans got their political information from the same few places. Today, consumption patterns are increasingly diverse—one person may watch Fox News, read the Wall Street Journal, and occasionally listen to NPR. Another person may watch ABC's World News Tonight, read a local newspaper, and the liberal blog Talking Points Memo. Another person may get all of his news from Google News. The new era of heterogeneity in media consumption means that reaching large audiences through a single outlet or medium is increasingly implausible.

Third, a result of that fragmentation may be growing informational polarization. To the extent that partisans increasingly receive their news from sources that present ideologically tilted—as opposed to balanced, independent—information, voters may slowly lose shared frames of reference. People with different predispositions are increasingly likely to be exposed to competing information, frames, and interpretations of political events. If consumers of different political stripes are exposed to different messages, even shared vocabularies (think "torture" vs. "enhanced interrogation techniques") may

become relatively rare. The realities of new information environment suggest that deliberation between people of different political stripes may become more difficult, just as evaluations of and attitudes toward political figures and issues have polarized along partisan lines in recent years (e.g., Jacobson 2007).

Fourth, because entertainment options have expanded just as rapidly as news choices, there is a slice of the electorate that will be inclined to opt out of political news altogether. Prior (2007) suggests that the expansion of entertainment options has already contributed to a widening of the political knowledge gap in the United States and lower voter turnout. A 2008 Pew survey found that the proportion of Americans regularly going "newsless" was 19 percent, up five percentage points since 1998. The increase was about twice as large among young people between the ages of 18 and 24.[17] If some individuals are increasingly difficult to reach through the media, old or new, then parties may see a shrinking pool of persuadable voters.

These possibilities, of course, amount to informed speculation. The media environment is rapidly changing, making prediction difficult. Every day seems to bring a new technological development that gives people access to more political information, faster, quicker. For parties to be able to succeed in this environment, they will need to continually update their communications strategies. Of that, we can be sure.

## Notes

1. This, at least, was an early prediction by TNS Media Intelligence/Campaign Media Advertising Group, which tracks spending on political advertising. See http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/10/15/ad.spending/index.html (accessed August 13, 2009).
2. Among the most famous political "tweets"—as Twitter messages are known—in the site's short history was delivered by Iowa Republican Sen. Charles Grassley. While on a June 2009 diplomatic trip in Europe, President Obama had called for action by Congress on health care reform. Grassley, evidently miffed by the transatlantic directive, posted on Twitter, "Pres Obama you got nerve while u sightseeing in Paris to tell us 'time to deliver' on health care. We still on skedul/ even workinWKEND" (National Public Radio 2009).
3. In recent years, the term netroots has become most associated with the online community on the liberal end of the ideological spectrum.
4. Pew does not distinguish between "strong" and "weak" partisans as do many surveys, including the American National Election Studies, which I rely on later. The Pew question asks respondents, "In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?" Respondents who call themselves independents are then asked, "As of today, do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?" Only independents who say they do not lean toward either party are included in the "Ind." category in Table 4.1.
5. Question wordings for Table 4.1 are as follows: "Now thinking about some campaign websites, did you ever go to The Obama/Biden campaign website to get news or information about the 2008 elections?"; "Now thinking about some campaign websites, did you ever go to The McCain/Palin campaign website to get news or information about the 2008 elections?"; "Over the past several

months, how often did you receive email from a candidate or political party?";
"Thinking about what you have done on SNS like Facebook and MySpace, have
you gotten any campaign or candidate information on the sites?"; "Thinking
about what you have done on SNS like Facebook and MySpace, have you signed
up as a 'friend' of any candidates on a social networking site?"

6. Because these questions were asked only of Facebook/MySpace users, the per-
centage of the total population visiting the candidates' pages is much lower even
than the percentages in the table.

7. The similarity of leaners to partisans underscores the point that people who call
themselves independents but admit to having a preference for a party should be
considered to be more like partisans than independents. Political scientists have
documented this tendency in voting behavior and political attitudes (Keith et al.
1992), and it appears the principle applies to new media consumption as well.

8. A transcript of the interview with McKinnon on the PBS show Frontline is
available here, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/newswar/interviews/
mckinnon.html (accessed June 23, 2009).

9. These figures come from the Project for Excellence in Journalism's 2009 State of
the News Media Report, available here: http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2009/
index.htm (accessed June 23, 2009).

10. Question wordings for Table 4.2 are: "How many days in the past week did you
watch the national network news on TV?"; "How many days in the past week did
you watch the local TV news shows such as 'Eyewitness News' or 'Action News'
in the late afternoon or early-evening?"; "How many days in the past week did
you read a daily newspaper?"; "How many days in the past week did you listen to
news on the radio?" The numbers reflect the percentage of respondents report-
ing three or more days of exposure.

11. Slicing the data in other ways—for example, looking at the percentage that
reported watching news or reading the paper seven days a week—yields the
same conclusions.

12. Recent evidence from Ladd (2009) about the decline in trust in the media sug-
gests this effect wanes as trust in the media erodes.

13. A story about the late CBS anchor Walter Cronkite underscores the difference
in the "carrying capacity" between TV newscasts and newspapers. Shortly after
Cronkite's death in July 2009, the broadcaster Robert McNeil told PBS that
Cronkite "had tried to get an hour on CBS and repeatedly failed. Once, he had
the entire text of a CBS half-hour show reprinted as though it were on the front
page of the New York Times and it covered less than three columns, which he
thought was very illustrative of how little information could actually be given,
however important it was in context at the time." See http://www.pbs.org/news-
hour/bb/media/july-dec09/cronkite_07-20.html (accessed August 14, 2009).

14. For example, a representative result was the one in a USA Today/Gallup Poll
taken in early September of 2008. Even before the financial crisis had reached
full boil, 42 percent of respondents said the economy would be the most impor-
tant issue to their vote. By comparison, 13 percent said the situation in Iraq, and
12 percent said terrorism. These data were retrieved from pollingreport.com.

15. This figure comes from the Project for Excellence in Journalism's 2009 "State of
the News Media" report.

16. See http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/elections2/elec-
tion_20082/2008_presidential_election/news_you_watch_says_a_lot_about_
how_you_ll_vote (accessed July 23, 2009).

17. See "Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources" at http://
people-press.org/report/444/news-media (accessed August 16, 2009).

# Chapter 5

# Party Organization and Mobilization of Resources
## Evolution, Reinvention, and Survival

*Diana Dwyre*

James Madison asserted in the *Federalist Papers* that "both the public good
and the rights of other citizens" could be sacrificed to the "ruling passion or
interest" of a majority faction, or political party (Madison, *Federalist No. 10*,
1787). Further, he argued for adoption of the Constitution that would estab-
lish a separation of powers and various checks and balances in the new fed-
eral government to protect the rights of the people by making it difficult for a
majority to take control of the entire government (Madison, *Federalist No. 51*,
1788). George Washington warned in his Farewell Address (drafted for him
by Alexander Hamilton) of "the baneful effects of the Spirit of Party," and his
successor, John Adams, asserted that "a division of the republic into two great
parties...is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our constitution"
(quoted in Hofstadter 1969, 2, 22). Given the Founders' fear of and disdain
for political parties, it is not surprising that there have been many concerted
attempts to chip away at the power and influence of these potentially power-
ful organizations. Yet, one of the enduring features of U.S. party organiza-
tions is their ability to survive, and sometimes thrive, by adapting to changing
and often hostile circumstances (Aldrich 1995; Brewer and Stonecash 2009;
Kolodny and Dwyre 1998).

Party organizations have evolved, and sometimes transformed, in order
to serve the needs of the politicians who utilize them to attain their goals
(Aldrich 1995; Pomper 1992). While these goals vary, the most basic ones have
been well-articulated by Richard Fenno: that politicians desire a long and
successful career in politics and thus work to be reelected or rise to higher
office; that they aim to achieve preferred policies; and that they want to gain
power and prestige within government (Fenno 1973). When achievement of
these goals is threatened, politicians often turn to parties to get back on track.
Indeed, various political actors, such as the Progressives and contemporary
campaign finance reformers, have altered the regulatory and political envi-
ronment in ways meant to limit the role of political parties in U.S. politics,
only to find that these resilient and malleable organizations reemerge from
often quite challenging circumstances. Other hurdles, such as technological